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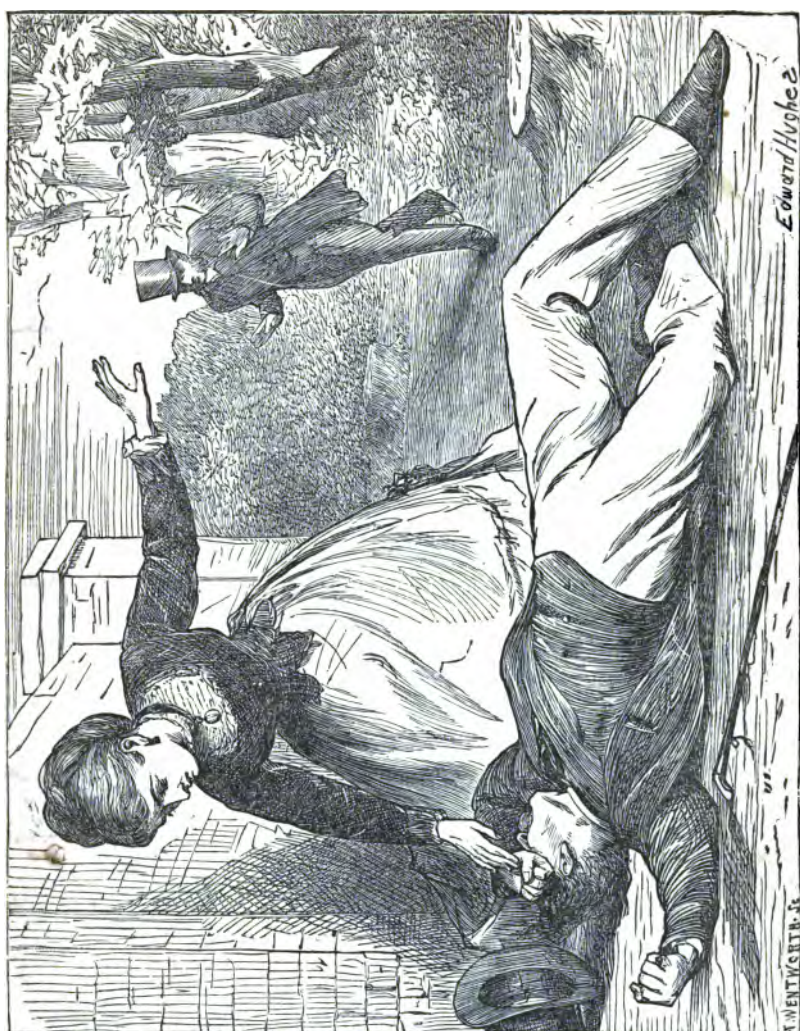
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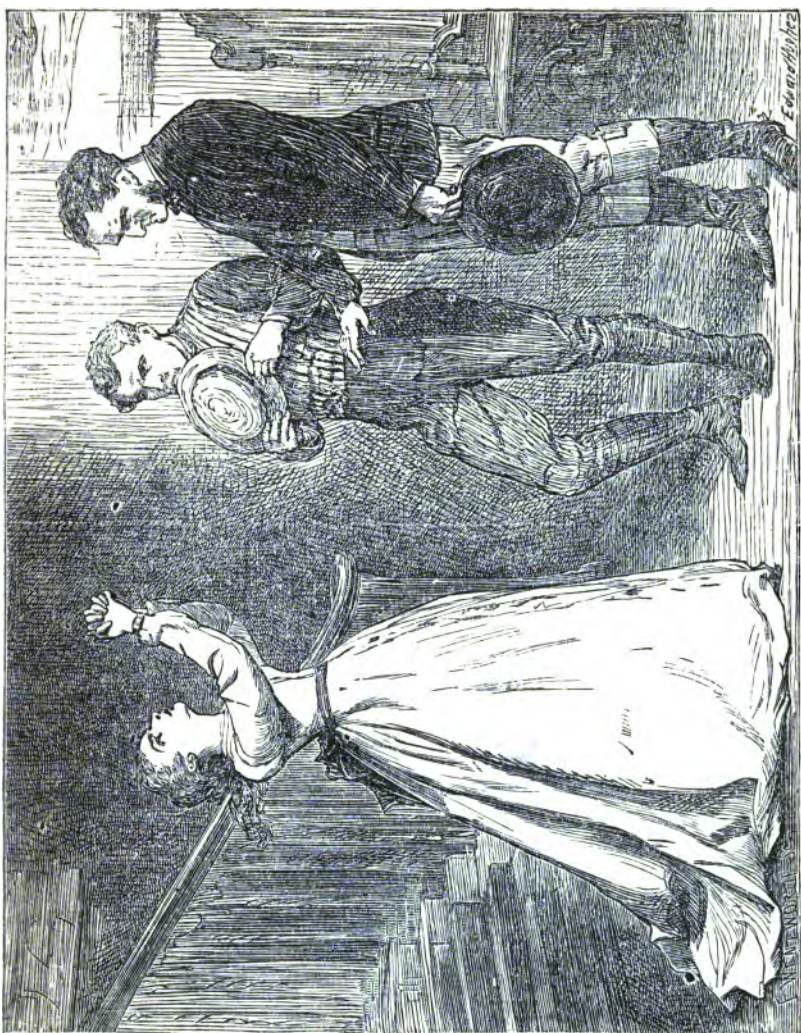


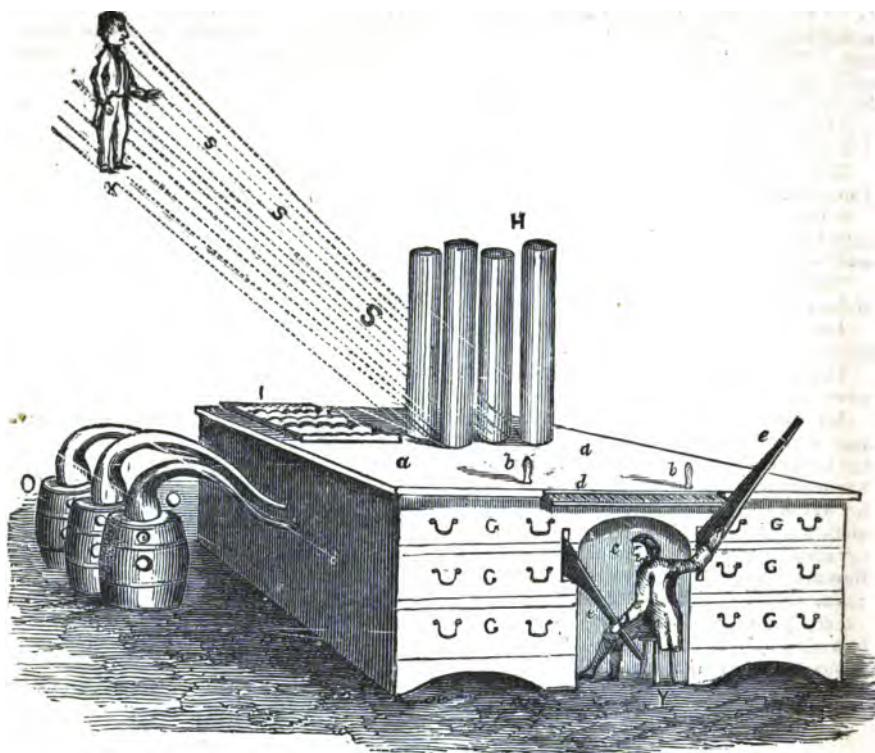


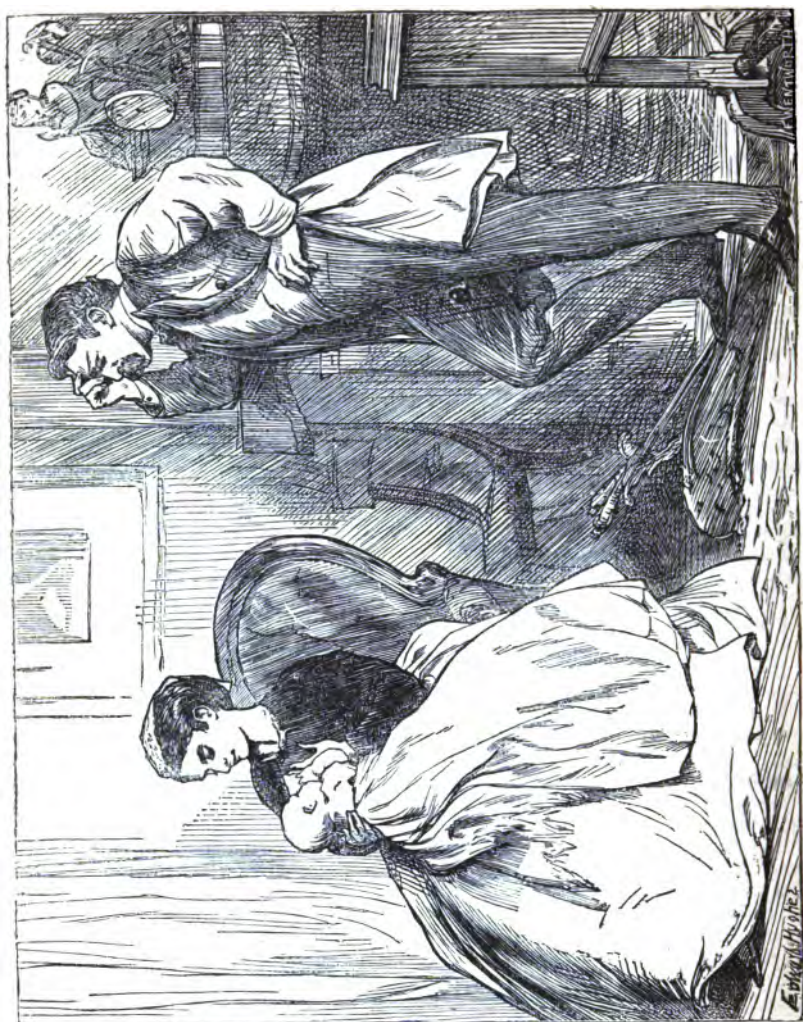












handed the child over to Nurse No. 2, with a lofty condescension, as who should say, "You suffice for portorage; I, the superior artist, reserve myself for emergencies." No. 2 received the invaluable bundle with meek complacency.

By and by Nurse 1 got fidgety, and kept changing her position.

"What is the matter, Mary?" said Lady Bassett, kindly. "Is the dress too tight?"

"No, no, my lady," said Mary sharply, "the gown's all right." And then she was quiet a little.

But she began again; and then Lady Bassett whispered Sir Charles, "I think she wants to sit forward; may I?"

"Certainly not. I'll change with her. Here, Mary, try this side. We shall have more room in the landau; it is double, with wide seats."

Mary was gratified, and amused herself looking out of the window. Indeed, she was quiet for nearly half an hour. At the expiration of that period the fit took her again. She beckoned haughtily for Baby, "which did come at her command," as the song says. She got tired of Baby, or something, and handed him back again.

Presently she was discovered to be crying.

General consternation! Universal, but vague consolation!

Lady Bassett looked an inquiry at Mrs. Millar. Mrs. Millar looked back assent. Lady Bassett assumed the command, and took off Mary's shawl.

"Yes," said she, to Mrs. Millar. "Now, Mary, be good; it is too tight."

Thus urged, the idiot contracted herself by a mighty effort, while Lady Bassett attacked the fastenings, and, with infinite difficulty, they unhooked three bottom hooks. The fierce burst open that followed, and the awful chasm, showed what gigantic strength vanity can command, and how savagely abuse it to maltreat nature.

Lady Bassett loosened the stays too, and a deep sigh of relief told the truth, which the lying tongue had denied, as it always does whenever the same question is put.

The shawl was replaced, and comfort gained till they entered the town of Staveleigh.

Nurse instantly exchanged places with Sir Charles, and took the child again. He was her banner in all public places.

When they came up to the inn, they were greeted with loud hurrahs. It was market-day. The town was full of Sir Charles's tenants and other farmers. His return had got wind, and every farmer under fifty had resolved to ride with him into Huntercombe.

When five or six, all shouting together, intimated this to Sir Charles, he sent one of

his people to order the butchers out to Huntercombe, with joints a score, and then to gallop on with a note to his housekeeper and butler. "For those that ride so far with me must sup with me," said he; a sentiment that was much approved.

He took Lady Bassett and the women upstairs and rested them about an hour: and then they started for Huntercombe, followed by some thirty farmers, and a dozen townspeople, who had a mind for a lark and to sup at Huntercombe Hall for once.

The ride was delightful; the carriage bowled swiftly along over a smooth road, with often turf at the side; and that enabled the young farmers to canter alongside without dusting the carriage-party. Every man on horseback they overtook joined them; some they met turned back with them, and these were rewarded with loud cheers: every eye in the carriage glittered, and every cheek was more or less flushed by this uproarious sympathy so gallantly shown, and the very thunder of so many horses' feet, each carrying a friend, was very exciting and glorious. Why, before they got to the village, they had fourscore horsemen at their backs.

As they got close to the village Mary Gosport held out her arms for young master: this was not the time to forego her importance.

The church-bells rang out a clashing peal, the cavalcade clattered into the village. Everybody was out to cheer, and, at sight of Baby, the women's voices were as loud as the men's. Old pensioners of the house were out bareheaded; one, with hair white as snow, was down on his knees, praying a blessing on them.

Lady Bassett began to cry softly; Sir Charles, a little pale, but firm as a rock; both bowing right and left, like royal personages; and well they might; every house in the village belonged to them but one.

On approaching that one, Mary Gosport turned her head round, and shot a glance round out of the tail of her eye. Ay, there was Richard Bassett, pale and gloomy, half hid behind a tree at his gate: but Hate's quick eye discerned him: at the moment of passing, she suddenly lifted the child high, and showed it him, pretending to show it to the crowd: but her eye told the tale; for, with that act of fierce hatred and cunning triumph, those black orbs shot a colored gleam like a furious leopard's.

A roar of cheers burst from the crowd at that inspired gesture of a woman, whose face and eyes seemed on fire: Lady Bassett turned pale.

The next moment they passed their own gate, and dashed up to the Hall steps of Huntercombe.

Sir Charles sent Lady Bassett to her room.

for the night. She walked, through a row of ducking servants, bowing and smiling like a gentle goddess.

Mary Gosport, afraid to march in a long dress with the child, for fear of accidents, handed him superbly to Millar, and strutted haughtily after her mistress, nodding patronage. Her follower, the meek Millar, stopped often to show the heir right and left, with simple geniality and kindness.

Sir Charles stood on the hall steps, and invited all to come in and take pot-luck.

Already spits were turning before great fires; a rump of beef, legs of pork, and peas-puddings boiling in one copper; turkeys and fowls in another; joints and pies baking in the great brick ovens; barrels of beer on tap, and magnums of champagne and port, marching steadily up from the cellars, and forming in line and square upon sideboards and tables.

Supper was laid in the hall, the dining-room, the drawing-room, and the great kitchen.

Poor villagers trickled in; no man or woman was denied: it was open house that night, as it had been four hundred years ago.

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-SIXTH.

WHEN Sharpe's clerk retired, after serving that writ on Bassett, Bassett went to Wheeler, and treated it as a jest. But Wheeler looked puzzled, and Bassett himself, on second thoughts, said he should like advice of Counsel. Accordingly they both went up to London to a solicitor, and obtained an interview with a Counsel learned in the law. He heard their story, and said, "The question is, can you convince a jury he was insane at the time?" "But he can't get in to Court," said Bassett. "I won't let him."

"O, the Court will make you produce him."
"But I thought an insane person was *civiler mortuus*, and could n't sue."

"So he is; but this man is not insane in law. Shutting up a man on certificates is merely a preliminary step to a fair trial by his peers, whether he is insane or not. Take the parallel case of a Felon. A magistrate commits him for trial, and generally on better evidence than medical certificates; but that does not make the man a Felon, or disentitle him to a trial by his peers; on the contrary, it entitles him to a trial, and he could get Parliament to interfere, if he was not brought to trial. This Plaintiff simply does what, he will say, you ought to have done; he tries himself; if he tries you at the same time, that is your fault. If he is insane now, fight. If he is not, I advise you to discharge him on the instant and then compound."

Wheeler said he was afraid the Plaintiff was too vindictive to come to terms.

"Well, then, you can show you discharged him the moment you had reason to think he was cured, and you must prove he was insane when you incarcerated him; but I warn you it will be uphill work if he is sane now; the jury will be apt to go by what they see."

Bassett and Wheeler retired; the latter did not presume to differ; but Bassett was dissatisfied and irritated.

"That fellow would only see the Plaintiff's side," said he. "The fool forgets there is an Act of Parliament, and that we have complied with its provisions to a T."

"Then why did you not ask his construction of the Act?" suggested Wheeler.

"Because I don't want his construction. I've read it, and it is plain enough to anybody but a fool. Well, I have consulted Counsel, to please you; and now I'll go my own way, to please myself."

He went to Burdoch, and struck a bargain, and Sir Charles was to be shifted to Burdoch's Asylum, and nobody allowed to see him there, etc. etc.; the old system, in short, than which no better has, as yet, been devised, for perpetuating, or even causing, mental aberration.

Rolfe baffled this, as described, and Bassett was literally stunned. He now saw that Sir Charles had an ally full of resources and resolution. Who could it be? He began to tremble. He complained to the police, and set them to discover who had thus openly and audaciously violated the Act of Parliament, and then he went and threatened Dr. Suaby.

But Rolfe and Sir Charles, who loved Suaby as he deserved, had provided against that; they had not let the doctor into their secret. He therefore said, with perfect truth, that he had no hand in the matter, and that Sir Charles, being bound upon his honor not to escape from Bellevue, would be in the Asylum still, if Mr. Bassett had not taken him out, and invoked brute force, in the shape of Burdoch. "Well, sir," said he, "it seems they have shown you two can play at that game." And so bade him good afternoon, very civilly.

Bassett went home sickened. He remained sullen and torpid for a day or two; then he wrote to Burdoch to send to London and try and recapture Sir Charles.

But next day he revoked his instructions, for he got a letter from the Commissioners of Lunacy, announcing the authoritative discharge of Sir Charles, on the strong representation of Dr. Suaby and other competent persons.

That settled the matter, and the poor cousin had kept the rich cousin three months

at his own expense, with no solid advantage, but the prospect of a lawsuit.

Sharpe, spurred by Rolfe, gave him no breathing time. With the utmost expedition the Declaration in Bassett v. Bassett followed the writ. It was short, simple, and in three counts.

"For violently seizing and confining the Plaintiff in a certain place, on a false pretence that he was insane.

"For detaining him in spite of evidence that he was not insane.

"For endeavoring to remove him to another place, with a certain sinister motive there specified.

"By which several acts the Plaintiff had suffered in his health and his worldly affairs, and had endured great agony of mind.

"And the Plaintiff claimed damages, ten thousand pounds."

Bassett sent over for his friend Wheeler, and showed him the new document, with no little consternation.

But their discussion of it was speedily interrupted by the clashing of triumphant bells and distant shouting.

They ran out, to see what it was. Bassett, half suspecting, hung back; but Mary Gosport's keen eye detected him, and she held up the heir to him, with hate and triumph blazing in her face.

He crept into his own house, and sank into a chair-foudroyé.

Wheeler, however, roused him to a necessary effort, and next day they took the declaration to Counsel, to settle their defence in due form.

"What is this?" said the learned gentleman. "Three counts! Why, I advised you to discharge him at once."

"Yes," said Wheeler, "and excellent advice it was. But my client—"

"Preferred to go his own road. And now I am to cure the error I did what I could to prevent."

"I dare say, sir, it is not the first time in your experience."

"Not by a great many. Clients, in general, have a great contempt for the notion that prevention is better than cure."

"He can't hurt me," said Bassett, impatiently. "He was separately examined by two doctors, and all the provisions of the statute exactly complied with."

"But that is no defence to this plaint. The statute forbids you to imprison an insane person without certain precautions; but it does not give you a right, under any circumstances, to imprison a sane man. That was decided in *Butcher v. Butcher*. The defence you rely on was pleaded as a second plea, and the Plaintiff demurred to it directly. The question was argued before the full court, and the judges, led by the first lawyer of the age, decided unanimously that

the provisions of the statute did not affect sane Englishmen, and their rights under the common law. They ordered the plea to be struck off the record, and the case was reduced to a simple issue of sane or insane. *Butcher v. Butcher* governs all these cases. Can you prove him insane? If not, you had better compound on any terms. In *Butcher's* case the jury gave £3,000, and the Plaintiff was a man of very inferior position to Sir Charles Bassett. Besides, the Defendant, *Butcher*, had not persisted against evidence, as you have. They will award £5,000 at least, in this case."

He took down a volume of reports, and showed them the case he had cited; and, on reading the unanimous decision of the judges, and the learning by which they were supported. Wheeler said at once, "Mr. Bassett, we might as well try to knock down St. Paul's with our heads, as to go against this decision."

They then settled to put in a single plea, that Sir Charles was insane at the time of his capture.

This done to gain time, Wheeler called on Sharpe; and, after several conferences, got the case compounded by an apology, a solemn retraction in writing, and the payment of four thousand pounds; and his counsel assured him his client was very lucky to get off so cheap.

Bassett paid the money, with the assistance of his wife's father: but it was a sickener; it broke his spirit, and even injured his health for some time.

Sir Charles improved the village with the money, and gave a copyhold tenement to each of the men Bassett had got imprisoned. So they and their sons and their grandsons lived rent free,—no, now I think of it, they had to pay fourpence a year to the Lord of the Manor.

Defeated at every point, and at last punished severely, Richard Bassett fell into a deep dejection and solitary brooding of a sort very dangerous to the reason. He would not go out of doors to give his enemies a triumph. He used to sit by the fire and mutter, "Blow upon blow, blow upon blow. My poor boy will never be Lord of Huntercombe now," and so on.

Wheeler pitied him, but could not rouse him.

At last a person, for whose narrow attainments and simplicity he had a profound, though, to do him justice, a civil contempt, ventured to his rescue. Mrs. Bassett went crying to her father, and told him she feared the worst, if Richard's mind could not be diverted from the Huntercombe estate, and his hatred of Sir Charles and Lady Bassett, which had been the great misfortune of her life, and of his own, but nothing would ever eradicate it. Richard had great abilities,

was a linguist, a wonderful accountant: could her dear father find him some profitable employment, to divert his thoughts?

"What, all in a moment?" said the old man; "then I shall have to buy it: and, if I go on like this, I shall not have much to leave you."

Having delivered this objection, he went up to London, and, having many friends in the City, and laying himself open to proposals, he got acent at last of a new insurance company that proposed also to deal in reversions, especially to entailed estates. By prompt purchase of shares in Bassett's name, and introducing Bassett himself, who, by special study, had a vast acquaintance with entailed estates, and a genius for arithmetical calculation, he managed somehow to get him into the direction with a stipend, and a commission on all business he might introduce to the office.

Bassett yielded sullenly, and now divided his time between London and the country.

Wheeler worked with him, on a share of commission, and they made some money between them.

After the bitter lesson he had received, Bassett vowed to himself he never would attack Sir Charles again, unless he was sure of victory. For all this, he hated him and Lady Bassett worse than ever, hated them to the death.

He never moved a finger down at Huntercombe, nor said a word; but, in London, he employed a private inquirer to find out where Lady Bassett had lived at the time of her confinement, and whether any clergyman had visited her.

The private inquirer could find out nothing, and Bassett, comparing his advertisements with his performance, dismissed him for a humbug.

But the office brought him into contact with a great many medical men, one after another. He used to say to each stranger, with an insidious smile, "I think you once attended my cousin, — Lady Bassett."

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-SEVENTH.

SIR CHARLES and Lady Bassett, relieved of their cousin's active enmity, led a quiet life, and one that no longer furnished striking incidents.

But dramatic incident is not everything: character and feeling show themselves in things that will not make pictures. Now it was precisely during this reposeful period, that three personages of this story exhibited fresh traits of feeling and also of character.

To begin with Sir Charles Bassett. He came back from the Asylum, much altered

in body and mind. Stopping his cigars had improved his stomach; working in the garden had increased his muscular power, and his cheeks were healthy, and a little sunburnt, instead of sallow. His mind was also improved: contemplation of insane persons had set him by a natural recoil to study self-control. He had returned a philosopher. No small thing could irritate him now. So far his character was elevated.

Lady Bassett was much the same as before, except a certain restlessness. She wanted to be told every day, or twice a day, that her husband was happy; and, although he was visibly so, yet, as he was quiet over it, she used to be always asking him if he was happy. This the reader must interpret as he pleases.

Mary Gosport gave herself airs. Respectful to her master and mistress, but not so tolerant of chaff in the kitchen as she used to be. Made an example of one girl, who threw a doubt on her marriage. Complained to Lady Bassett, affected to fret, and the girl was dismissed.

She turned singer. She had always sung psalms in church, but never a profane note in the house. Now she took to singing over her nursing; she had a voice of prodigious power and mellowness, and provided she was not asked, would sing lullabies and nursery rhymes from another county, that ravished the hearer. Horsemen have been known to stop in the road, to hear her sing through an open window of Huntercombe, two hundred yards off.

Old Mr. Meyrick, a farmer well-to-do, fascinated by Mary Gosport's singing, asked her to be his housekeeper, when she should have done nursing her charge.

She laughed in his face.

A fanatic, who was staying with Sir Charles Bassett, offered her three years' education in Do, Ra, Mi, Fa, preparatory to singing at the opera.

Declined without thanks.

Mr. Drake, after hovering shyly, at last found courage to reproach her for deserting him, and marrying a sailor.

"Teach you not to shilly shally," said she. "Beauty won't go a begging. Mind you look sharper next time."

Which dialogue, being held in the kitchen, gave the women some amusement at the young farmer's expense.

One day Mr. Richard Bassett, from motives of pure affection, no doubt, not curiosity, desired mightily to inspect Mr. Bassett, aged eight months and two days.

So, in his usual wily way, he wrote to Mrs. Gosport, asking her, for old acquaintance' sake, to meet him in the meadow at the end of the lawn. This meadow belonged to Sir Charles, but Richard Bassett had a right of way through it, and could step into

"BUT WHERE'S THE LITTLE HEIR?"



it by a postern, as Mary could by an iron gate.

He asked her to come at eleven o'clock, because, at that hour, he observed she walked on the lawn with her charge.

Mary Gosport came to the tryst, but without Mr. Bassett.

Richard was very polite; she cold, taciturn, observant.

At last he said, "But where's the little heir?"

She flew at him directly. "It is him you wanted, not me. Did you think I'd bring him here — for you to kill him?"

Come, I say."

"Ah, you'd kill him, if you had a chance. But you never shall. Or, if you did n't kill him, you'd cast the evil eye on him, for you

are well known to have the evil eye. No; he shall outlive thee and thine, and be lord of these here manors, when thou is gone to hell, thou villain."

Mr. Richard Bassett turned pale, but did the wisest thing he could, — put his hands in his pockets, and walked into his own premises, followed, however, by Mary Gosport, who stormed at him, till he shut his postern in her face.

She stood there trembling for a little while, then walked away, crying.

But, having a mind like running water, she was soon seated on a garden-chair, singing over her nursing, like a mavis: she had delivered him to Millar, while she went to speak her mind to her old lover.

As for Richard Bassett, he was theory-

bitten, and so turned everything one way. To be sure, as long as the woman's glaring eyes, and face distorted by passion, were before him, he interpreted her words simply: but when he thought the matter over he said to himself, "The evil eye! That is all bosh; the girl is in Lady Bassett's secrets; and I am not to see young master: some day I shall know the reason why."

Sir Charles Bassett now belonged to the tribe of clucking cocks quite as much as his cousin had ever done; only Sir Charles had the good taste to confine his clucks to his own first floor. Here, to be sure, he richly indemnified himself for his self-denial abroad. He sat for hours at a time, watching the boy on the ground at his knee, or in his nurse's arms.

And, whilst he watched the infant with undisguised delight, Lady Bassett would watch him with a sort of furtive and timid complacency.

Yet, at times, she suffered from twinges of jealousy, — a new complaint with her.

I think I have mentioned that Sir Charles, at first, was annoyed at seeing his son and heir nursed by a woman of low condition. Well, he got over that feeling by degrees, and, as soon as he did get over it, his sentiments took quite an opposite turn. A woman for whom he did very little, in his opinion, — since what, in Heaven's name, were a servant's wages, — he saw that woman do something great for him: saw her nourish his son and heir from her own veins; the child had no other nurture; yet the father saw him bloom and thrive, and grow surprisingly.

A weak observer, or a less enthusiastic parent, might have overlooked all this; but Sir Charles had naturally an observant eye and an analytical mind, and this had been suddenly, but effectually, developed by the Asylum and his correspondence with Rolfe.

He watched the nurse then, and her maternal acts, with a curious and grateful eye, and a certain reverence for her power.

He observed, too, that his child reacted on the woman: she had never sung in the house before; now she sang ravishingly, sang in low, mellow, yet sonorous notes some ditties that had lulled mediæval barons in their cradles.

And what had made her vocal made her beautiful at times.

Before, she had appeared to him a handsome girl, with the hardish look of the lower classes: but now, when she sat in a sunny window, and lowered her black lashes on her nursling, with the mixed and delicious smile of an exuberant nurse relieving and relieved, she was soft, poetical, sculptorial, maternal, womanly.

This species of contemplation, though half philosophical, half paternal, and quite

innocent, gave Lady Bassett some severe pangs. She hid them, however, only she bided her time and then suggested the propriety of weaning Baby.

But Mrs. Gosport got Sir Charles's ear, and told him what magnificent children they reared in her village by not weaning infants till they were eighteen months old or so.

By this means, and by crying to Lady Bassett, and representing her desolate condition, with a husband at sea, she obtained a reprieve, coupled, however, with a good-humored assurance from Sir Charles that she was the greater baby of the two.

When the inevitable hour approached that was to dethrone her, she took to reading the papers, and one day she read of a disastrous wreck, the *Carbrea Castle*, only seven saved out of a crew of twenty-three. She read the details carefully, and, two days afterwards she received a letter written by a shipmate of Mr. Gosport, in a handwriting not very unlike her own, relating the sad wreck of the *Carbrea Castle* and the loss of several good sailors, James Gosport for one.

Then the house was filled with the wailing and weeping of the bereaved widow; and then came consolers and raised doubts; but then somebody remembered to have seen the loss of that very ship in the paper. The paper was found, and the fatal truth was at once established.

Upon this Mr. Bassett was weaned as quickly as possible, and the widow clothed in black at Lady Bassett's expense, and everything in reason was done to pet her and console her.

But she cried bitterly, and said she would throw herself into the sea and follow her husband.

Huntercombe was nowhere near the coast.

At last, however, she relented, and concluded to remain on earth as dry nurse to Mr. Bassett.

Sir Charles did not approve this; it seemed unreasonable to turn a wet nurse into a dry nurse, when that office was already occupied by a person her senior and more experienced.

Lady Bassett agreed with him, but shrugged her shoulders and said, "Two nurses will not hurt, and I suspect it will not be for long. Mary does not feel her husband's loss one bit."

"Surely you are mistaken. She howls loud enough."

"Too loud, — much," said Lady Bassett, dryly.

Her perspicuity was not deceived. In a very short time, Mr. Meyrick, unable to get her for his housekeeper, offered her marriage.

"What!" said she, "and James Gosport not dead a month?"

"Say the word now; and take your own time," said he.

"Well, I might do worse," said she.

About six weeks after this Drake came about her, and in tender tones of consolation suggested that it is much better for a pretty girl to marry one who ploughs the land than one who ploughs the sea.

"That is true," said Mary, with a sigh; "I have found it to my sorrow."

After this Drake played a bit with her, and then relented, and one evening offered her marriage, expecting her to jump eagerly at his offer.

"You be too late, young man," said she, coolly, "I'm bespoken."

"Doan't ye say that! How can ye be bespoken? Why t'other han't been dead four months yet."

"What o' that? This one spoke for me within a week. Why our banns are to be cried to-morrow; come to church and hear 'em, that will learn ye not to shilly shally so next time."

"Next time!" cried Drake, half blubbering: then, with a sudden roar, "What, be you coming to market again, arter this?"

"Like enough: he is a sight older than I be. 'Tis Mr. Meyrick, if ye must know."

Now Mr. Meyrick was well-to-do, and so Drake was taken aback.

"Mr. Meyrick!" said he, and turned suddenly respectful.

But presently a view of a rich widow flitted before his eye.

"Well," said he, "you sha'n't throw it in my teeth again as I speak too late. I ask you now, and no time lost."

"What, am I to stop my banns, and jilt Farmer Meyrick for thee?"

"Nay, nay. But I mean I'll marry you, if you'll marry me, as soon as ever the breath is out of that dall'd old hunks's body."

"Well, well, Will Drake," said Mary, gravely, "if I do outlive this one, — and you baint married long afore, — and if you keeps in the same mind as you be now, — and lets me know it in good time, — I'll see about t'."

She gave a founce that made her petticoats whisk like a mare's tail, and off to the kitchen, where she related the dialogue with an appropriate reflection, the company containing several of either sex. "Dilly, Dally, and Shilly, Shally, they belongs to us as woman be. I hate and despise a man, as can't make up his mind in half a minnut."

So the Widow Gosport became Mrs. Meyrick, and lived in a farm-house not quite a mile from the Hall.

She used often to come to the Hall, and take a peep at her lamb; this was the name she gave Mr. Bassett long after he had ceased to be a child.

About four years after the triumphant re-

turn to Huntercombe, Lady Bassett conceived a sudden coldness towards the little boy, though he was universally admired.

She concealed this sentiment from Sir Charles, but not from the female servants: and, from one to another, at last it came round to Sir Charles. He disbelieved it utterly at first; but, the hint having been given him, he paid attention, and discovered there was, at all events, some truth in it.

He awaited his opportunity, and remonstrated, "My dear Bella, am I mistaken, or do I really observe a falling off in your tenderness for your child?"

Lady Bassett looked this way and that, as if she meditated flight, but at last she resigned herself, and said, "Yes, Charles; my heart is quite cold to him."

"Good heavens, Bella! But why? Is not this the same little angel that came to our help in trouble, that comforted me even before his birth, when my mind was morbid, to say the least?"

"I suppose he is the same," said she, in a tone impossible to convey, by description of mine.

"That is a strange answer."

"If he is, I am changed." And this she said doggedly and unlike herself.

"What!" said Sir Charles, very gravely, and with a sort of awe: "can a woman withdraw her affection from her child, her innocent child? If so, my turn may come next."

"O Charles! Charles!" and the tears began to well.

"Why, who can be secure after this? What is so stable as a mother's love? If that is not rooted too deep for gusts of caprice to blow it away, in Heaven's name what is?"

No answer to that but tears.

Sir Charles looked at her very long, attentively, and seriously, and dropped the subject.

But his dropping so suddenly a subject of this importance was rather suspicious, and Lady Bassett was too shrewd not to see that.

They watched each other.

But with this difference: Sir Charles could not conceal his anxiety, whereas the lady appeared quite tranquil.

One day Sir Charles said, cheerfully, "Who do you think dines here to-morrow, and stays all night? Dr. Suaby."

"By invitation, dear?" asked Lady Bassett, quietly.

Sir Charles colored a little, and said quietly, "Yes."

Lady Bassett made no remark, and it was impossible to tell by her face whether the visit was agreeable or not.

Some time afterwards, however, she said, "Whom shall I ask to meet Dr. Suaby?"

"Nobody, for Heaven's sake!"

"Will not that be dull for him?"

"I hope not."

"You will have plenty to say to him, eh, darling?"

"We never yet lacked topics. Whether or no, his is a mind I choose to drink neat."

"Drink him neat?"

"Undiluted with rural minds."

"Oh!"

She uttered that monosyllable very dryly, and said no more.

Dr. Suaby came next day, and dined with them, and Lady Bassett was charming; but, rather earlier than usual, she said, "Now I am sure you and Dr. Suaby must have many things to talk about," and retired, casting back an arch, and almost a cunning smile.

The door closed on her; the smile fled, and a sombre look of care and suffering took its place.

Sir Charles entered at once on what was next his heart; told Dr. Suaby he was in some anxiety; and asked him if he had observed anything in Lady Bassett.

"Nothing new," said Dr. Suaby, "charming as ever."

Then Sir Charles confided to Dr. Suaby, in terms of deep feeling and anxiety what I have coldly told the reader.

Dr. Suaby looked a little grave, and took time to think before he spoke.

At last he delivered an opinion, of which this is the substance, though not the exact words.

"It is sudden and unnatural, and I cannot say it does not partake of mental aberration. If the patient was a man, I should fear the most serious results: but here we have to take into account the patient's sex, her nature, and her present condition. Lady Bassett has always appeared to me a very remarkable woman. She has no mediocrity in anything; understanding keen, perception wonderfully swift, heart large and sensitive, nerves high strung, sensibilities acute. A person of her sex, tuned so high as this, is always subject, more or less, to hysteria. It is controlled by her intelligence and spirit: but she is now, for the time being, in a physical condition that has often deranged less sensitive women than she is. I believe this about the boy to be a hysterical delusion, which will pass away when her next child is born. That is to say, she will probably ignore her first-born, and everything else, for a time; but these caprices, springing in reality from the body rather than the mind, cannot endure forever. When she has several grown-up children the first-born will be the favorite. It comes to that at last, my good friend."

"These are the words of wisdom," said Sir Charles; "God bless you for them."

After a while he said, "Then what you advise is simply—patience?"

"No, I don't say that. With such a large house as this, and your resources, you might easily separate them before the delusion grows any farther. Why risk a calamity?"

"A calamity?" and Sir Charles began to tremble.

"She is only cold to the child as yet. She might go farther, and fancy she hated it. *Obsta principiis*: that is my motto. Not that I really think, for a moment, the child is in danger. Lady Bassett has mind to control her nerves with; but why run the shadow of a chance?"

"I will not run the shadow of a chance," said Sir Charles, resolutely; "let us come up stairs: my decision is taken."

The very next day Sir Charles called on Mrs. Meyrick, and asked if he could come to any arrangement with her to lodge Mr. Bassett and his nurse under her roof; "The boy wants change of air," said he.

Mrs. Meyrick jumped at the proposal, but declined all terms. "No," said she, "the child I have suckled shall never pay me for his lodging. Why should he, sir, when I'd pay you to let him come, if I was n't afraid of offending you?"

Sir Charles was touched at this, and, being a gentleman of tact, said, "You are very good: well, then, I must remain your debtor for the present."

He then took his leave, but she walked with him a few yards, just as far as the wicket gate that separated her little front garden from the high-road.

"I hope," said she, "my lady will come and see me, when my lamb is with me: a sight of her would be good for sore eyes. She have never been here but once, and then she did not get out of her carriage."

"Humph!" said Sir Charles, apologetically, "she seldom goes out now; you understand."

"O, I've heard, sir; and I do put up my prayers for her; for my lady has been a good friend to me, sir, and, if you will believe me, I often sets here and longs for a sight of her, and her sweet eyes, and her hair like sunshine, that I've had in my hand so often. Well, sir, I hope it will be a girl this time, a little girl with golden hair; that's what I wants this time. They'll be the prettiest pair in England."

"With all my heart," said Sir Charles; "girl, or boy, I don't care which; but I'd give a few thousands if it was here, and the mother safe."

He hurried away, ashamed of having uttered the feelings of his heart to a farmer's wife. To avoid discussion, he sent Mrs. Millar and the boy off, all in a hurry, and then told Lady Bassett what he had done.

She appeared much distressed at that, and asked what she had done.

He soothed her, and said she was not to blame at all; and she must not blame him either. He had done his best.

"After all you are the master," said she, submissively.

"I am," said he, "and men will be tyrants, you know."

Then she flung her arm round her tyrant's neck and there was an end of the discussion.

One day he inquired for her and heard, to his no small satisfaction, she had driven to Mrs. Meyrick's, with a box of things for Mr. Bassett. She stayed at the farmhouse all day, and Sir Charles felt sure he had done the right thing.

Mrs. Meyrick found out to her cost the difference between a nursling and a rampageous little boy.

Her lamb, as she called him, was now a young monkey, vigorous, active, restless, and, unfortunately, as strong on his pins as most boys of six. It took two women to look after him, and smart ones too, so swiftly did he dash off into some mischief or other. At last Mrs. Meyrick simplified matters in some degree by locking the large gate, and even the small wicket, and ordering all the farm people and milkmaids to keep an eye on him, and bring him straight to her if he should stray, for he seemed to hate indoors. Never was such a boy.

Nevertheless, such as had not the care of him admired the child for his beauty and assurance. He seemed to regard the whole human race as one family, of which he was the rising head. The moment he caught sight of a human being he dashed at it and into conversation by one unbroken movement.

Now children in general are too apt to hide their intellectual treasures from strangers by shyness.

One day this ready converser was standing on the steps of the house, when a gentleman came to the wicket gate, and looked over into the garden.

Young master darted to the gate directly, and, getting his foot on the lowest bar and his hands on the spokes, gave tongue.

"Who are you? I'm Mr. Bassett. I don't live here; I'm only staying. My home is Huncom Hall. I'm to have it for myself when papa dies. I did n't know dat till I come here. How old are you? I'm half-past four—"

A loud scream, a swift rustle, and Mr. Bassett was clutched up by Mrs. Meyrick, who snatched him away with a wild glance of terror and defiance, and bore him swiftly into the house with words ringing in her ears that cost Mr. Bassett dear, he being the only person she could punish. She sat

down on a bench, flung young master across her knee in a minute, and bestowed such a smacking on him as far transcended his wildest dreams of the weight, power, and pertinacity of the human arm.

The words Richard Bassett had shot her flying with were these:—

"Too late! I've SEEN THE PARSON'S BRAT."

Richard Bassett mounted his horse and rode over to Wheeler, for he could no longer wheedle the man of law over to Highmore, and I will say briefly why.

1st. About three years ago, an old lady, one of his few clients, left him three thousand pounds, just reward of a very little law and a vast deal of gossip.

2d. The head solicitor of the place got old and wanted a partner. Wheeler bought himself in, and thenceforth took his share of a good business, and by his energy enlarged it, though he never could found one for himself.

3d. He married a wife.

4th. She was a pretty woman, and blessed with jealousy of a just and impartial nature: she was equally jealous of women, men, books, business, anything that took her husband from her.

No more sleeping out at Highmore; no more protracted potations; no more bachelor tricks for Wheeler. He still valued his old client, and welcomed him; but the venue was changed, so to speak.

Richard Bassett was kept waiting in the outer office; but when he did get in he easily prevailed on Wheeler to send the next client or two to his partner, and give him a full hearing.

Then he opened his business. "Well," said he, "I've seen him at last!"

"Seen him? seen whom?"

"The boy they have set up to rob my boy of the estate. I've seen him, Wheeler, seen him close; and HE'S AS BLACK AS MY HAT."

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-EIGHTH.

WHEELER, instead of being thunder-stricken, said quietly, "O, is he? Well?"

"Sir Charles is lighter than I am: Lady Bassett has a skin like satin, and red hair."

"Red! say auburn gilt. I never saw such lovely hair."

"Well," said Richard, impatiently, "then the boy has eyes like sloes, and a brown skin, like an Italian, and black hair almost; it will be quite."

"Well," said Wheeler, "it is not so very uncommon for a dark child to be born of fair parents, or vice versa. I once saw an

urchin that was like neither father nor mother, but the image of his father's grandfather, that died eighty years before he was born. They used to hold him up to the portrait."

Said Bassett, "Will you admit that it is uncommon?"

"Not so uncommon as for a high-bred lady, living in the country, and adored by her husband, to trifle with her marriage vow, for that is what you are driving at."

"Then we have to decide between two improbabilities; will you grant me that, Mr. Wheeler?"

"Yes."

"Then suppose I can prove fact upon fact, and coincidence upon coincidence, all tending one way! Are you so prejudiced, that *nothing* will convince you?"

"No. But it will take a great deal: that lady's face is full of purity, and she fought us like one who loved her husband."

"*Fronti nulla fides*: and as for her fighting, her infidelity was the weapon she defeated us with.—Will you hear me?"

"Yes, yes; but pray stick to facts, and not conjectures."

"Then don't interrupt me with childish arguments:

"*Fact 1.*—Both reputed parents fair; the boy as black as the ace of spades.

"*Fact 2.*—A handsome young fellow was always buzzing around her ladyship, and he was a parson, and ladies are remarkably fond of parsons.

"*Fact 3.*—This parson was of Italian breed, dark, like the boy.

"*Fact 4.*—This dark young man left Huntercombe one week, and my lady left it the next, and they were both in the city of Bath at one time.

"*Fact 5.*—The Lady went from Bath to London. The dark young man went from Bath to London."

"None of this is new to me," said Wheeler, quietly.

"No; but it is the rule, in estimating coincidences, that each fresh one multiplies the value of the others. Now the boy looking so Italian is a new coincidence, and so

is what I am going to tell you,—at last I have found the medical man who attended Lady Bassett in London."

"Ah!"

"Yes, sir; and I have learned *Fact 6.*—Her ladyship rented a house, but hired no servants, and engaged no nurse. She had no attendant but a lady's-maid, no servant but a sort of charwoman.

"*Fact 7.*—She dismissed this doctor unusually soon, and gave him a very large fee.

"*Fact 8.*—She concealed her address from her husband."

"Oh! can you prove that?"

"Certainly. Sir Charles came up to town, and had to hunt for her, came to this very medical man, and asked for the address his wife had not given him; but lo! when he got there the bird was flown.

"*Fact 9.*—Following the same system of concealment, my lady levanted from London within ten days of her confinement.

"Now put all these coincidences together. Don't you see that she had a lover, and that he was about her in London and other places? Stop! *Fact 10.*—Those two were married for years, but had no child but this equivocal one; and now four years and a half have passed, during all which time they have had none, and the young parson has been abroad during that period."

Wheeler was staggered and perplexed by this artful array of coincidences.

"Now advise me," said Bassett.

"It is not so easy. Of course if Sir Charles was to die, you could claim the estate, and give them a great deal of pain and annoyance; but the burden of proof would always rest on you. My advice is not to breathe a syllable of this: but get a good detective, and push your inquiries a little farther, among house agents, and the women they put into houses; find that charwoman, and see if you can pick up anything more."

"Do you know such a thing as an able detective?"

"I know one that will work, if I instruct him."

"Instruct him, then."

"I will."

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-NINTH.

LADY BASSETT, as her time of trial drew near, became despondent.

She spoke of the future, and tried to pierce it; and in all these little loving speculations and anxieties, there was no longer any mention of herself.

This meant that she feared her husband was about to lose her. I put the fear in the very form it took in that gentle breast.

Possessed with this dread, so natural to her situation, she set her house in order, and left her little legacies of clothes, and jewels, without the help of a lawyer; for Sir Charles, she knew, would respect her lightest wish.

To him she left her all, except these trifles, and, above all, — a manuscript book. It was the history of her wedded life. Not the bare outward history: but such a record of a sensitive woman's heart, as no male writer's pen can approach.

It was the nature of her face and her tongue to conceal; but here, on this paper, she laid bare her heart; here her very subtlety operated, not to hide, but to dissect herself and her motives.

But, O, what it cost her to pen this faithful record of her love, her trials, her doubts, her perplexities, her agonies, her temptations, and her crime. Often she laid down the pen, and hid her face in her hands. Often the scalding tears ran down that scarlet face. Often she writhed at her desk, and wrote on, sighing and moaning. Yet she persevered to the end. It was the grave that gave her the power. "When he reads this," she said, "I shall be in my tomb. Men make excuses for the dead. My Charles will forgive me when I am gone. He will know I loved him to desperation."

It took her many days to write; it was quite a thick quarto; so much may a woman feel in a year or two; and, need I say that, to the reader of that volume, the mystery of her conduct was all made clear as daylight; clearer far, as regards the revelation of mind and feeling, than I, dealer in broad facts, shall ever make it, for want of a woman's mental microscope, and delicate brush.

And, when this record was finished, she

wrapped it in paper, and sealed it with many seals, and wrote on it, —

*"Only for my husband's eye.
From her who loved him not wis
but too well."*

And she took other means that even the superscription should never be seen of any other eye but his. It was some little comfort to her, when the book was written.

She never prayed to live. But she used to pray, fervently, piteously, that her child might live, and be a comfort and joy to his father.

The person employed by Wheeler discovered the house agents, and the woman he had employed.

But these added nothing to the evidence Bassett had collected.

At last, however, this woman, under the influence of a promised reward, discovered a person who was likely to know more about the matter; viz.: the woman who was in the house with Lady Bassett at the very time.

But this woman scented gold directly; so she held mysterious language; declined to say a word to the officer; but intimated that she knew a great deal, and that the matter was in truth well worth looking into, and she could tell some strange tales, if it was worth her while.

This information was sent to Bassett; he replied that the woman only wanted money for her intelligence, and he did not blame her; he would see her next time he went to town, and felt sure she would complete his chain of evidence. This put Richard Bassett into extravagant spirits. He danced his little boy on his knee, and said, "I'll run this little horse against the parson's brat; five to one, and no takers."

Indeed, his exultation was so loud and extravagant, that it jarred on gentle Mrs. Bassett. As for Jessie, the Scotch servant, she shook her head, and said the master was fey.

In the morning he started for London, still so exuberant and excited that the Scotch woman implored her mistress not to let him go; there would be an accident on the railway, or something. But Mrs. Bassett knew her husband too well to interfere with his journeys.

Before he drove off he demanded his little boy.

"He must kiss me," said he, "for I'm going to work for him. D'ye hear that, Jane? This day makes him heir of Huntercombe and Bassett."

The nurse brought word that Master Bassett was not very well this morning.

"Let us look at him," said Bassett.

He got out of his gig, and went to the nursery. He found his little boy had a dry cough, with a little flushing.

"It is not much," said he; "but I'll send the doctor over from the town."

He did so, and himself proceeded up to London.

The doctor came, and, finding the boy labored in breathing, administered a full dose of ipecacuhana. This relieved the child for the time; but about four in the afternoon he was distressed again, and began to cough with a peculiar grating sound.

Then there was a cry of dismay: "The croup!" The doctor was gone for, and a letter posted to Richard Bassett, urging him to come back directly.

The doctor tried everything, even mercury, but could not check the fatal discharge: it stiffened into a still more fatal membrane.

When Bassett returned next afternoon in great alarm, he found the poor child thrusting its fingers into its mouth, in a vain attempt to free the deadly obstruction.

A warm bath and strong emetics were now administered, and great relief obtained. The patient even ate and drank, and asked leave to get up and play with a new toy he had. But, as often happens in this disorder, a severe relapse soon came, with a spasm of the glottis so violent and prolonged that the patient at last resigned the struggle. Then pain ceased forever: the heavenly smile came; the breath went; and nothing was left in the little white bed but a fair piece of tinted clay, that must return to the dust, and carry thither all the pride, the hopes, the boasts of the stricken father, who had schemed, and planned, and counted without Him, in whose hands are the issues of life and death.

As for the child himself, his lot was a happy one, if we could but see what the world is really worth. He was always a bright child, that never cried, nor complained: his first trouble was his last; one day's pain, then bliss eternal: he never got poisoned by his father's spirit of hate, but loved and was beloved during his little lifetime; and, dying, he passed from his Noah's ark to an inheritance a thousand times richer than Huntercombe, Bassett, and all his cousin's lands.

The little grave was dug, the bell tolled, and a man bowed double with grief saw his child and his ambition laid in the dust.

Lady Bassett heard the bell tolled, and spoke but two words: "Poor woman!"

She might well say so. Mrs. Bassett was in the same condition as herself, yet this heavy blow must fall on her.

As for Richard Bassett, he sat at home, bowed down and stupid with grief.

Wheeler came one day to console him; but, at the sight of him, refrained from idle words. He sat down by him for an hour, in silence. Then he got up and said "Good by."

"Thank you, old friend, for not insulting me," said Bassett, in a broken voice.

Wheeler took his hand, and turned away his head, and so went away, with a tear in his eye.

A fortnight after this he came again, and found Bassett in the same attitude, but not in the same leaden stupor. On the contrary, he was in a state of tremor, he had lost under the late blow the sanguine mind that used to carry him through everything.

The doctor was up stairs, and his wife's fate trembled in the balance.

"Stay by me," said he, "for all my nerve is gone. I'm afraid I shall lose her; for I have just begun to value her; and that is how God deals with his creatures, the merciful God, as they call him."

Wheeler thought it rather hard God Almighty should be blamed, because Dick Bassett had taken eight years to find out his wife's merits; but he forbore to say so. He said kindly he would stay.

Now while they sat in trying suspense the church-bells struck up a merry peal.

Bassett started violently, and his eyes gave a strange glare.

"That's the other!" said he; for he had heard about Lady Bassett by this time.

Then he turned pale. "They ring for him: then they are sure to toll for me."

This foreboding was natural enough in a man so blinded by egotism as to fancy that all creation, and the Creator himself, must take a side in Bassett v. Bassett.

Nevertheless events did not justify that foreboding. The bells had scarcely done ringing for the happy event at Huntercombe, when joyful feet were heard running on the stairs; joyful voices clashed together in the passage, and in came a female servant with joyful tidings. Mrs. Bassett was safe, and the child in the world. "The loveliest little girl you ever saw!"

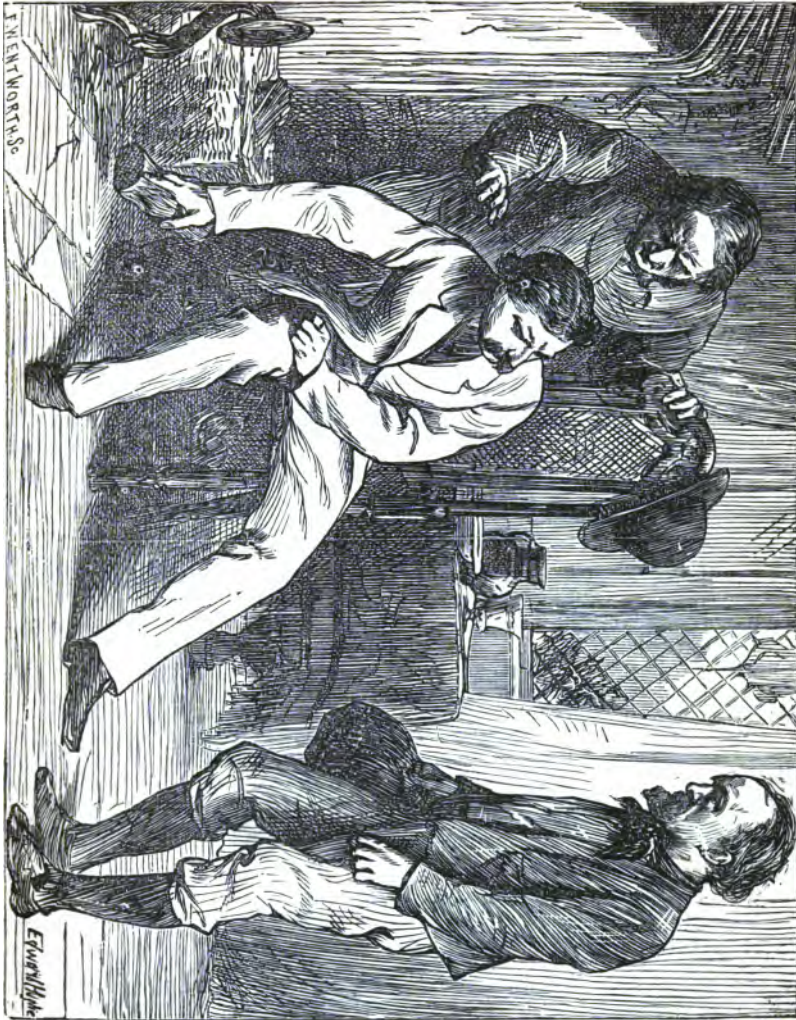
"A girl!" cried Richard Bassett, with contemptuous amazement. Even his melancholy forebodings had not gone that length. "And what have they got at Huntercombe?"

"O, it is a boy, sir, there."

"Of course."

The ringers heard, and sent one of their number to ask him if they should ring.

"I'LL TEACH YOU TO COME AND MOCK ME."



"What for?" asked Bassett, with a nasty glittering eye; and then with a sudden fury, he seized a large piece of wood from the basket to fling at his insultor. "I'll teach you to come and mock me."

The ringer vanished ducking.

"Gently," said Wheeler, "gently."

Bassett chucked the wood back into the basket, and sat down gloomily, saying, "Then how dare he come and talk about ringing bells for a girl. To think that I should have all this fright, and my wife all this trouble — for a girl!"

It was no time to talk of business then; but about a fortnight afterwards, Wheeler said, "I took the detective off, to save you expense."

"Quite right," said Bassett, wearily.

"I gave you the woman's address; so the matter is in your hands now, I consider."

"Yes," said Bassett, wearily. "Move no farther in it."

"Certainly not; and, frankly, I should be glad to see you abandon it."

"I have abandoned it. Why should I stir the mud now? I and mine are thrown out forever; the only question is, shall a son of Sir Charles, or the parson's son, inherit? I'm for the wrongful heir. Ay," he cried, starting up, and beating the air with his fists in sudden fury, "since the right Bassetts are never to have it, let the wrong Bassetts be thrown out, at all events; I'm on my back, but Sir Charles is no better off; a bastard will succeed him, thanks to that cursed woman who defeated me."

This turn took Wheeler by surprise. It also gave him real pain. "Bassett," said he, "I pity you. What sort of a life has yours been for the last eight years? Yet, when there's no fuel left for war and hatred, you blow the embers. You are incurable."

"I am," said Richard. "I'll hate those two with my last breath, and curse them in my last prayer."

CHAPTER THE THIRTIETH.

LADY BASSETT'S forebodings, like most of our insights into the future, were confuted by the event.

She became the happy mother of a flax-haired boy. She insisted on nursing him herself; and the experienced persons who attended her raised no objection.

In connection with this, she gave Sir Charles a peck, not very severe, but sudden, and remarkable as the only one on record.

He was contemplating her and her nursing with the deepest affection, and happened to say, "My own Bella, what delight it gives me to see you!"

"Yes," said she, "we will have only one mother this time, will we, my darling? and it shall be Me." Then suddenly, turning her head like a snake, "O, I saw the looks you gave that woman!"

This was the famous peck; administered in return for a look that he had bestowed on Mary Gosport, not more than five years ago.

Sir Charles would, doubtless, have bled to death on the spot, but either he had never been aware how he looked, or time and business had obliterated the impression, for he was unaffectedly puzzled, and said, "What woman do you mean, dear?"

"No matter, darling," said Lady Bassett, who had already repented her dire severity: "all I say is, that a nurse is a rival I could not endure now; and, another thing, I do believe those wet nurses give their disposition to the child: it is dreadful to think of."

"Well, if so, Baby is safe. He will be the most amiable boy in England."

"He shall be more amiable than I am, — scolding my husband of husbands"; and she leaned towards him, Baby and all, for a kiss from his lips.

We say at school "Seniores priores," "let favor go by seniority," but, where babies adorn the scene, it is "juniores priores," with that sex to which the very young are confided.

To this rule, as might be expected, Lady Bassett furnished no exception; she was

absorbed in Baby, and trusted Mr. Bassett a good deal to his attendant, who bore an excellent character for care and attention.

Now Mr. Bassett was strong on his pins and in his will, and his nurse-maid, after all, was young; so he used to take his walks, nearly every day, to Mrs. Meyrick's: she petted him enough, and spoiled him in every way, while the nurse-maid was flirting with her farm-servants out of sight.

Sir Charles Bassett was devoted to the boy, and used always to have him to his study in the morning, and to the drawing-room after dinner, when the party was small, and that happened much oftener now than heretofore: but at other hours he did not look after him, being a business man, and considering him at that age to be under his mother's care.

One day the only guest was Mr. Rolfe; he was staying in the house for three days, upon a condition suggested by himself, viz.: that he might enjoy his friends' society in peace and comfort, and not be set to roll the stone of conversation up some young lady's back, and obtain monosyllables in reply, faintly lisped amidst a clatter of fourteen knives and forks. As he would not leave his writing-table on any milder terms, they took him on these.

After dinner in came Mr. Bassett, erect, and a proud nurse with little Compton, just able to hold his nurse's gown and toddle.

Rolfe did not care for small children; he just glanced at the angelic fair-haired infant, but his admiring gaze rested on the elder boy.

"Why, what is here, — an Oriental Prince?"

The boy ran to him directly. "Who are you?"

"Rolfe the writer. Who are you, — the Gypsy King?"

"No; but I am very fond of gypsies. I'm Mister Bassett: and when papa dies I shall be Sir Charles Bassett."

Sir Charles laughed at this with paternal fatuity, especially as the boy's name happened to be Reginald Francis, after his grandfather.

Rolfe smiled satirically, for these little speeches from children did much to reconcile him to his lot.

"Meantime," said he, "let us feed off him; for it may be forty years before we can dance over his grave. First let us see what is the unwholesomest thing on the table."

He rose, and, to the infinite delight of Mr. Bassett, and even of Master Compton, who pointed and crowed from his mother's lap, he got up on his chair, and put on a pair of spectacles to look.

"Eureka!" said he; "behold that dish by Lady Bassett; those are *marrons glacés*:

fetch them here, and let us go in for a fit of the gout at once."

"Gout! what's that?" inquired Mr. Bassett.

"Don't ask me."

"You don't know."

"Not know! What, did n't I tell you I was Rolfe the writer. Writers know everything. That is what makes them so modest."

Mr. Bassett was now unnaturally silent for five minutes, munching chestnuts; this enabled his guests to converse; but, as soon as he had cleared his plate, he cut right across the conversation, with that savage contempt for all topics but his own, which characterizes gentlemen of his age, and says he to Rolfe, "You know everything? then, what's a parson's brat?"

"Well, that's the one thing I don't know," said Rolfe; "but a brat I take to be a boy who interrupts ladies and gentlemen with nonsense, when they are talking sense."

"I am very much obliged to you, Mr. Rolfe," said Lady Bassett. "That remark was very much needed."

Then she called Reginald to her, and lectured him, *sotto voce*, to the same tune.

"You old bachelors are rather hard," said Sir Charles, not very well pleased.

"We are obliged to be; you parents are so soft. After all, it is no wonder; what a superb boy it is! — Ah, here is nurse. I'm so sorry. Now we shall be cabined, cribbed, confined to rational conversation, and I shall not be expected to — (good night, little flaxen angel; good-by, handsome and loquacious demon; kiss and be friends) — expected to know, all in a minute, what is a parson's brat. By the by, talking of parsons, what has become of Angelo?"

"He has been away a good many years. Consumption, I hear."

"He was a fine-built fellow, too; was he not, Lady Bassett?"

"I don't know; but he was beautifully strong. I think I see him now, carrying dear Charles in his arms all down the garden."

"Ah, you see he was raised in a university that does not do things by halves, but trains both body and mind, as they did at Athens; for the union of study and athletic sports is spoken of as a novelty, but it is only a return to antiquity."

Here letters were brought by the second post. Sir Charles glanced at his, and sent them to his study. Lady Bassett had but one. She said "May I?" to both gentlemen, and then opened it.

"How strange!" said she. "It is from Mr. Angelo: just a line to say he is coming home quite cured."

She began this composedly, but blushed afterwards, — blushed quite red.

"May I!" said she, and tossed it deli-

cately half-way to Rolfe. He handed it to Sir Charles.

Some remarks were then made about the coincidence, and nothing further passed worth recording at that time.

Next day Lady Bassett, with instinctive curiosity, asked Master Reginald how he came to put such a question as that to Mr. Rolfe.

"Because I wanted to know."

"But what put such words into your head? I never heard a gentleman say such words: and you must never say them again, Reginald."

"Tell me what it means, and I won't," said he.

"O," said Lady Bassett, "since you bargain with me, sir, I must bargain with you. Tell me first where you ever heard such words."

"When I was staying at nurse's. Ah, that was jolly."

"You like that better than being here?"

"Yes."

"I am sorry for that. Well, dear, did nurse say that? Surely not?"

"O no; it was the man."

"What man?"

"Why, the man that came to the gate one morning, and talked to me, and I talked to him, and that nasty nurse ran out, and caught us, and carried me in, and gave me such a hiding, and all for nothing."

"A hiding! What words the poor child picks up! But I don't understand why nurse should beat you."

"For speaking to the man. She said he was a bad man, and she would kill me if ever I spoke to him again."

"O, it was a bad man, and said bad words, — to somebody he was quarrelling with?"

"No, he said them to nurse because she took me away."

"What *did* he say, Reginald?" asked Lady Bassett, becoming very grave and thoughtful all at once.

"He said 'That's too late: I've seen the parson's brat.'"

"Oh!"

"And I've asked nurse again and again what it meant, but she won't tell me. She only says the man is a liar, and I am not to say it again: and so I never did say it again — for a long time: but, last night, when Rolfe the writer said he knew everything, it struck my head — what is the matter, mamma?"

"Nothing; nothing."

"You look so white. Are you ill, mamma?" and he went to put his arms round her, which was a mighty rare thing with him.

She trembled a good deal, and did not either embrace him or repel him. She only trembled.

After some time she recovered herself enough to say, in a voice, and with a manner, that impressed itself, at once, on this sharp boy: "Reginald, your nurse was quite right. Understand this; the man was your enemy — and mine; the words he said, you must not say again. It would be like taking up dirt and flinging some on your own face, and some on mine."

"I won't do that," said the boy, firmly. "Are you afraid of the man, that you look so white?"

"A man with a woman's tongue — who can help fearing?"

"Don't you be afraid; as soon as I'm big enough, I'll kill him."

Lady Bassett looked with surprise at the child, he uttered this resolve with such a steady resolution.

She drew him to her, and kissed him on the forehead.

"No, Reginald," said she; "we must not shed blood; it is as wicked to kill our enemies as to kill any one else. But never speak to him, never even listen to him; if he tries to speak to you, run away from him, and don't let him — he is our enemy."

That same day she went to Mrs. Meyrick, to examine her. But she found the boy had told her all there was to tell.

Mrs. Meyrick, whose affection for her was not diminished, was downright vexed. "Dear me!" said she; "I did think I had kept that from vexing of you. To think of the dear child hiding it for nigh two years, and then to blurt it out like that! Nobody heard him, I hope?"

"Others heard; but —"

"Did n't heed; the Lord be praised for that."

"Mary," said Lady Bassett, solemnly, "I am not equal to another battle with Mr. Richard Bassett; and such a battle! Better tell all, and die."

"Don't think of it," said Mary. "You're safe from Richard Bassett now. Times are changed since he came spying to my gate. His own boy is gone. You have got two. He'll lie still, if you do. But, if you tell your tale, he must hear on't, and he'll tell his. For God's sake, my lady, keep close. It is the curse of women that they can't just hold their tongues, and see how things turn. And is this a time to spill good liquor? Look at Sir Charles! why, he is another man; he have got flesh on his bones now, and color into his cheeks, and 't was you and I made a man of him. It is my belief you'd never have had this other little angel, but for us having sense and courage to see what *must* be done. Knock down our own work, and send him wild again, and give that Richard Bassett a handle? You'll never be so mad."

Lady Bassett replied. The other an-

swered; and so powerfully, that Lady Bassett yielded, and went home sick at heart, but helpless, and in a sea of doubt.

Mr. Angelo did not call. Sir Charles asked Lady Bassett if he had called on her. She said, "No."

"That is odd," said Sir Charles. "Perhaps he thinks we ought to welcome him home. Write and ask him to dinner."

"Yes, dear. Or you can write."

"Very well, I will. No, I will call."

Sir Charles called, and welcomed him home and asked him to dinner. Angelo received him rather stiffly at first; but accepted his invitation.

He came, looking a good deal older and graver, but almost as handsome as ever; only somewhat changed in mind. He had become a zealous clergyman; and his soul appeared to be in his work. He was distant and very respectful to Lady Bassett; I might say obsequious. Seemed almost afraid of her, at first.

That wore off in a few months; but he was never quite so much at his ease with her as he had been before he left some years ago.

And so did time roll on.

Every morning, and every night, Lady Bassett used to look wistfully at Sir Charles and say, "Are you happy, dear? Are you sure you are happy?"

And he used always to say, and with truth, that he was the happiest man in England, thanks to her.

Then she used to relax the wild and wistful look with which she asked the question, and give a sort of sigh, half content, half resignation.

In due course another fine boy came, and filled the Royal office of Baby, in his turn.

But my story does not follow him.

Reginald was over ten years old, and Compton nearly six. They were as different in character as complexion, both remarkable boys.

Reginald, Sir Charles's favorite, was a wonderful boy for riding, running, talking; and had an amazing genius for melody; he whistled to the admiration of the village, and latterly he practised the fiddle in woods and under hedges, being aided and abetted therein by a gypsy boy whom he loved, and who, indeed, provided the instrument.

He rode with Sir Charles, and rather liked him; his brother he never noticed, except to tease him. Lady Bassett he admired, and almost loved her while she was in the act of playing him undeniable melodies. But he liked his nurse Meyrick better on the whole; she flattered him more, and was more uniformly subservient.

With these two exceptions he despised the whole race of women, and affected male society only, especially of grooms, stable-

boys; and gypsies; these last weloomed him to their tents, and almost prostrated themselves before him, so dazzled were they by his beauty and his color. It is believed they suspected him of having gypsy blood in his veins. They let him into their tents, and even into some of their secrets, and he promised them they should have it all their own way as soon as he was Sir Reginald; he had outgrown his original theory that he was to be Sir Charles on his father's death. He hated in-doors; when fixed, by command, to a book, would beg hard to be allowed to take it into the sun; and at night would open his window and poke his black head out to wash in the moonshine, as he said.

He despised ladies and gentlemen, said they were all affected fools, and gave imitations of all his father's guests, to prove it; and so keen was this child of nature's eye for affectation that, very often, his disapproving parents were obliged to confess the imp had seen with his fresh eye defects custom had made them overlook, or the solid good qualities that lay beneath had overbalanced.

Now all this may appear amusing and eccentric, and so on, to strangers; but after the first hundred laughs or so with which paternal indulgence dismisses the faults of childhood, Sir Charles became very grave.

The boy was his darling, and his pride. He was ambitious for him. He earnestly desired to solve for him a problem, which is as impossible as squaring the circle, viz.: how to transmit our experience to our children. The years and the health he had wasted before he knew Bella Bruce, these he resolved his successor should not waste. He looked higher for this beautiful boy than for himself. He had fully resolved to be member for the county one day; but he did not care about it for himself; it was only to pave the way for his successor; that Sir Reginald, after a long career in the Commons, might find his way into the House of Peers, and so obtain dignity, in exchange for antiquity; for, to tell the truth, the ancestors of four fifths of the British House of Peers had been hewers of wood and drawers of water, at a time when these Bassetts had already been gentlemen of distinction for centuries.

All this love, and this vicarious ambition, were now mortified daily. Some fathers could do wonders for a brilliant boy, and with him; they expect him, and a dull boy appears; that is a bitter pill; but this was worse; Reginald was a sharp boy; he could do anything; fasten him to a book for twenty minutes, he would learn as much as most boys in an hour; but there was no keeping him to it, unless you strapped him or nailed him, for he had the will of a mule, and the

suppleness of an eel to carry out his will. And then his tastes—low, as his features were refined; he was a sort of moral dung-fork; picked up all the slang of the stable, and scattered it in the dining-room, and drawing-room; and, once or twice, he stole out of his comfortable room at night, and slept in a gypsy's tent, with his arm round a gypsy boy, unsullied, from his cradle, by soap.

At last Sir Charles could no longer reply to his wife at night, as he had done for this ten years past: he was obliged to confess that there was one cloud upon his happiness. "Dear Reginald grieves me, and makes me dread the future; for, if the child is father to the man, there is a bitter disappointment in store for us. He is like no other boy; he is like no human creature I ever saw; at his age, and long after, I was a fool; I was a fool till I knew you; but surely I was a gentleman. I cannot see myself again—in my first-born."

CHAPTER THE THIRTY-FIRST.

LADY BASSETT was paralyzed for a minute or two by this speech. At last she replied by asking a question,—rather a curious one. "Who nursed you, Charles?"

"What, when I was a baby? How can I tell? Yes, by the by, it was my mother nursed me—so I was told."

And your mother was a Le Compton. This poor boy was nursed by a servant. O, she has some good qualities, and certainly devoted to us,—to this day her face brightens at sight of me,—but she is essentially vulgar; and do you remember, Charles, I wished to wean him early; but I was overruled, and the poor child drew his nature from that woman for nearly eighteen months; it is a thing unheard of now-days."

"Well, but surely it is from our parents we draw our nature."

"No; I think it is from our nurses. If Compton or Alec ever turn out like Reginald, blame nobody but their nurse, and that is Me."

Sir Charles smiled faintly at this piece of feminine logic, and asked her what he should do.

She said she was quite unable to advise. Mr. Rolfe was coming to see them soon, perhaps he might be able to suggest something.

Sir Charles said he would consult him; but he was clear on one thing, the boy must be sent from Huntercombe, and so separated from all his present acquaintances.

Mr. Rolfe came and the distressed father opened his heart to him in strict confidence respecting Reginald.

Rolfe listened and sympathized, and knit his brow, and asked time to consider what he had heard, and also to study the boy for himself.

He angled for him next day accordingly. A little table was taken out on the lawn, and presently Mr. Rolfe issued forth in a uniform suit of dark blue flannel and a sombrero hat, and set to work writing a novel in the sun.

Reginald in due course descried this figure, and it smacked so of that Bohemia to which his own soul belonged, that he was attracted thereby, but made his approaches stealthily like a little cat.

Presently a fiddle went off behind a tree, so close that the novelist leaped out of his seat with an eldritch screech; for he had long ago forgotten all about Mr. Reginald, and, when he got heated in this kind of composition, any sudden sound seemed to his tense nerves and boiling brain about ten times as loud as it really was.

Having relieved himself with a yell, he sat down with the mien of a martyr expecting tortures; but he was most agreeably disappointed; the little monster played an English melody, and played it in tune. This done, he whistled a quick tune and played a slow second to it in perfect harmony; this done, he whistled the second part and played the quick treble; a very simple feat, but still ingenious for a boy, and new to his hearer.

"Bravo! bravo!" cried Rolfe with all his heart.

Mr. Reginald emerged, radiant with vanity. "You are like me, Mr. Writer," said he; "you don't like to be cooped up indoors."

"I wish I could play the fiddle like you, my fine fellow."

"Ah, you can't do that all in a minute; see the time I have been at it."

"Ah, to be sure, I forgot your anti-quity."

"And it is n't the time only; it's giving your mind to it, old chap."

"What, you don't give your mind to your books then, as you do to your fiddle, young gentleman?"

"Not such a flat. Why, lookee here, Governor, if you go and give your mind to a thing you don't like, it's always time wasted, because some other chap, that does like it, will beat you, and what's the use working, for to be beat?"

"'For,' is redundant," objected Rolfe.

"But if you stick hard to the things you like, you do 'em downright well. But old people are such fools, they always drive you the wrong way. They make the gals play music six hours day, and you might as well set the hen bullfinches to pipe. Look at the gals as come here, how they rattle up and

down the piano, and can't make it sing a morsel. Why they *couldn't* rattle like that, if they'd music in their skins, d—n 'em: and they drive me to those stupid books, because I'm all for music and moonshine. Can you keep a secret?"

"As the tomb."

"Well, then, I can do plenty of things well, besides fiddling: I can set a wire with any poacher in the parish. I have caught plenty of our old man's hares in my time; and it takes a workman to set a wire as should be. Show me a wire, and I'll tell you whether it was Hudson, or Whitbeck, or Squinting Jack, or who it was that set it. I know all their work that walks by moonlight hereabouts."

"This is criticism; a science; I prefer art: play me another tune, my bold Bohemian."

"Ah, I thought I should catch ye with my fiddle. You're not such a muff as the others, old 'un, not by a long chalk. Hang me, if I won't give ye 'Ireland's music,' and I've sworn never to waste that on a fool."

He played the old Irish air so simply and tunably, that Rolfe leaned back in his chair, with half-closed eyes, in soft voluptuous ecstasy.

The youngster watched him with his coal-black eye.

"I like you," said he, "better than I thought I should, a precious sight."

"Highly flattered."

"Come with me, and hear my nurse sing it."

"What, and leave my novel?"

"O, bother your novel."

"And so I will. That will be tit for tat; it has bothered me. Lead on, Bohemian bold."

The boy took him, over hedge and ditch the short cut to Meyrick's farm; and caught Mrs. Meyrick, and said she must sing "Ireland's music" to Rolfe the writer.

Mrs. Meyrick apologized for her dress, and affected shyness about singing: Mr. Reginald stared at first, then let her know that, if she was going to be affected like the girls that came to the Hall, he should hate her, as he did them, and this he confirmed with a naughty word.

Thus threatened, she came to book, and sang Ireland's melody in a low, rich, sonorous voice; Reginald played a second; the harmony was so perfect and strong, that certain glass candelabra on the mantel-piece rang loudly, and the drops vibrated. Then he made her sing the second, and he took the treble with his violin; and he wound up by throwing in a third part himself, a sort of counter-tenor, his own voice being much higher than the woman's.

The tears stood in Rolfe's eyes. "Well," said he, "you have got the soul of music,

"WELL," SAID HE, "YOU HAVE GOT THE SOUL OF MUSIC, YOU TWO."



you two. I could listen to you 'From morn till noon, from noon till dewy eve.'"

As they returned to Huntercombe, this mercurial youth went off at a tangent, and Rolfe saw him no more.

He wrote in peace, and walked about between the heats.

Just before dinner-time, the screams of women were heard hard by, and the writer hurried to the place, in time to see Mr. Bassett hanging by the shoulder from the branch of a tree, about twenty feet from the ground.

Rolfe halloed, as he ran, to the women, to fetch blankets to catch him, and got under the tree, determined to try and catch him in his arms, if necessary; but he encouraged the boy to hold on.

"All right, Governor," said the boy in a quavering voice.

It was very near the kitchen; maids and men poured out with blankets; eight people held one, under Rolfe's direction, and down came Mr. Bassett in a semicircle, and bounded up again off the blanket, like an india-rubber ball.

His quick mind recovered courage, the moment he touched wool.

"Crikey! that's jolly," said he, "give me another toss or two."

"O no! no!" said a good-natured maid. "Take an' put him to bed right off, poor dear."

"Hold your tongue, ye bitch," said young hopeful: "if ye don't toss me, I'll turn ye all off, as soon as ever the old un kicks the bucket."

Thus menaced, they thought it prudent to toss him: but, at the third toss, he yelled out "Oh! oh! I'm all wet: it's blood! I'm dead."

Then they examined, and found his arm was severely lacerated by an old nail that had been driven into the tree, and it had torn the flesh in his fall: he was covered with blood, the sight of which quenched his manly spirit, and he began to howl.

"Old linen rag, warm water, and a bottle of champagne," shouted Rolfe: the servants flew.

Rolfe dressed and bandaged the wound for him, and then he felt faint: the champagne soon set that right; and then he wanted to get drunk, alleging, as a reason, that he had not been drunk for this two months.

Sir Charles was told of the accident, and was distressed by it, and also by the cause.

"Rolfe," said he, sorrowfully, "there is a ring-dove's nest on that tree: she and hers have built there in peace and safety for a hundred years, and cooed about the place. My unhappy boy was climbing the tree, to take the young, after solemnly promising me he never would: that is the bitter truth. What shall I do with the young barbarian?"

He sighed, and Lady Bassett echoed the sigh.

Said Rolfe, "The young barbarian, as you call him, has disarmed me: he plays the fiddle like a civilized angel."

"O Mr. Rolfe!"

"What, you his mother, and not found that out yet? O yes, he has a heaven-born genius for music."

Rolfe then related the musical feats of the urchin.

Sir Charles begged to observe that this talent would go a very little way towards fitting him to succeed his father and keep up the credit of an ancient family.

"Dear Charles, Mr. Rolfe knows that; but it is like him to make the best of things, to encourage us. But what do you think of him on the whole, Mr. Rolfe? has Sir Charles more to hope or to fear?"

"Give me another day or two, to study him," said Rolfe.

That night there was a loud alarm. Mr. Bassett was running about the veranda in his night-dress.

They caught him, and got him to bed, and Rolfe said it was fever; and, with the assistance of Sir Charles and a footman, laid him between two towels steeped in tepid water, then drew blankets tight over him, and, in short, packed him.

"Ah!" said he complacently; "I say, give me a drink of moonshine, old chap."

"I'll give you a bucketful," said Rolfe; then, with the servant's help, took his little

bed, and put it close to the window; the moonlight streamed in on the boy's face, his great black eyes glittered in it. He was diabolically beautiful. "Kiss me, moonshine," said he, "I like to wash in you."

Next day he was, apparently, quite well, and certainly ripe for fresh mischief. Rolfe studied him, and, the evening before he went, gave Sir Charles and Lady Bassett his opinion, but not with his usual alacrity; a weight seemed to hang on him, and, more than once, his voice trembled.

"I shall tell you," said he, "what I see — what I foresee — and then, with great diffidence, what I advise."

"I see — what Naturalists call, a reversion in race, a boy who resembles in color and features neither of his parents, and indeed, bears little resemblance to any of the races that have inhabited England since history was written. He suggests rather some Oriental type."

Sir Charles turned round in his chair, with a sigh, and said, "We are to have a romance it seems."

Lady Bassett stared with all her eyes, and began to change color.

The theorist continued, with perfect composure, "I don't undertake to account for it, with any precision. How can I? Perhaps there is Moorish blood in your family, and here it has revived; you look incredulous, but there are plenty of examples, ay, and stronger than this: every child that is born resembles some progenitor; how then do you account for Julia Pastrana, a young lady who dined with me last week, and sang me 'Ah perdona,' rather feebly, in the evening? Bust and figure like any other lady, hand exquisite, arms neatly turned, but with long silky hair from the elbow to the wrist. Face, ugh! forehead made of black leather, eyes all pupil, nose an excrescence, chin pure monkey, face all covered with hair; briefly, a type extinct ten thousand years before Adam, yet it could revive at this time of day. Compared with La Pastrana, and many much weaker examples of antiquity revived, that I have seen, your Mauritanian son is no great marvel after all."

"This is a *little* too far-fetched," said Sir Charles, satirically; "Bella's father was a very dark man, and it is a tradition in our family that all the Bassetts were as black as ink till they married with you Rolfes, in the year 1684."

"Oho!" said Rolfe, "is it so? See how discussion brings out things."

"And then," said Lady Bassett, "Charles, dear, tell Mr. Rolfe what I think."

"Ay, do," said Rolfe; "that will be a new form of circumlocution."

Sir Charles complied with a smile. "Lady Bassett's theory is, that children

derive their nature quite as much from their wet-nurses as from their parents, and she thinks the faults we deplore in Reginald are to be traced to his nurse; by the by, she is a dark woman too."

"Well," said Rolfe, "there's a good deal of truth in that, as far as regards the disposition. But I never heard color so accounted for; yet why not? It has been proved that the very bones of young animals can be colored pink, by feeding them on milk so colored."

"There!" said Lady Bassett.

"But no nurse could give your son a color which is not her own. I have seen the woman; she is only a dark English-woman. Her arms were embrowned by exposure, but her forehead was not brown. Mr. Reginald is quite another thing. The skin of his body, the white of his eye, the pupil, all look like a reversion to some Oriental type; and, mark the coincidence; he has mental peculiarities that point towards the East."

Sir Charles lost patience. "On the contrary," said he, "he talks, and feels, just like an English snob, and makes me miserable."

"O, as to that, he has picked up vulgar phrases at that farm, and in your stables; but he never picked up his musical genius in stables and farms, far less his poetry."

"What poetry?"

"What poetry? Why, did not you hear him? Was it not poetical of a wounded, fevered boy to beg to be laid by the window, and to say 'Let me drink the moon-shine'? Take down your Homer, and read a thousand lines hap-hazard, and see whether you stumble over a thought more poetical than that. But criticism does not exist; whatever the dead said was good; whatever the living say is little; as if the dead were a race apart, and had never been the living, and the living would never be the dead."

Heaven knows where he was running to now, but Sir Charles stopped him, by conceding that point. "Well, you are right: poor child, it was poetical," and the father's pride predominated, for a moment, over every other sentiment.

"Yes; but where did it come from? That looks to me a typical idea; I mean an idea derived, not from his luxurious parents, dwellers in curtained mansions, but from some outdoor and remote ancestor; perhaps from the Oriental tribe that first colonized Britain; they worshipped the sun and the moon, no doubt; or perhaps, after all, it only came from some wandering tribe that passed their lives between the two lights of Heaven, and never set foot in a human dwelling."

"This," said Sir Charles, "is a flattering

speculation, but so wild and romantic, that I fear it will lead us to no practical result. I thought you undertook to advise me. What advice can you build on these cobwebs of your busy brain?"

"Excuse me, my practical friend," said Rolfe. "I opened my discourse in three heads. What I see — what I foresee — and what, with diffidence, I advise. Pray don't disturb my methodus, or I am done for; never disturb an artist's form. I have told you what I see. What I foresee is this; you will have to cut off the entail with Reginald's consent, when he is of age, and make the Saxon boy Compton your successor. Cutting off entails runs in families, like everything else; your grandfather did it, and so will you. You should put by a few thousands every year, that you may be able to do this without injustice either to your Oriental or your Saxon son."

"Never!" shouted Sir Charles: then, in a broken voice, "He is my first-born, and my idol; his coming into the world rescued me out of a morbid condition: he healed my one great grief. Bar the entail, and put his younger brother in his place — never!"

Mr. Rolfe bowed his head politely, and left the subject, which indeed could be carried no further, without serious offence.

"And now for my advice. The question is, how to educate this strange boy. One thing is clear; it is no use trying the hum-drum plan any longer; it has been tried, and failed. I should adapt his education to his nature. Education is made as stiff and unyielding as a board; but it need not be. I should abolish that spectacled tutor of yours at once, and get a tutor, young, enterprising, manly, and supple, who would obey orders: and the order should be to observe the boy's nature, and teach accordingly. Why need men teach in a chair, and boys learn in a chair? The Athenians studied not in chairs. The Peripatetics, as their name imports, hunted knowledge afoot; those who sought truth in the groves of Academus were not seated at that work. Then let the tutor walk with him, and talk with him by sunlight, and moonlight, relating old history, and commenting on each new thing that is done, or word spoken, and improve every occasion. Why, I myself would give a guinea a day to walk with William White about the kindly aspects, and wooded slopes of Selborne, or with Karr about his garden. Cut Latin and Greek clean out of the scheme. They are mere cancers to those who can never excel in them. Teach him not dead languages, but living facts. Have him in your justice room for half an hour a day, and give him your own comments on what he has heard there. Let his tutor take him to all quarter sessions and assizes, and stick to him like

diaculum, especially out of doors; order him never to be admitted to the stable yard; dismiss every biped there that lets him come. Don't let him visit his nurse so often, and never without his tutor; it was she who taught him to look forward to your decease; that is just like these common women. Such a tutor as I have described will deserve £500 a year. Give it him; and dismiss him if he plays humdrum, and does n't earn it. Dismiss half a dozen, if necessary, till you get a fellow with a grain or two of genius for tuition. When the boy is seventeen, what with his Oriental precocity, and this system of education, he will know the world as well as a Saxon boy of twenty-one, and that is not saying much. Then, if his nature is still as wild, get him a large tract in Australia; cattle to breed, kangaroos to shoot, swift horses to thread the bush and gallop mighty tracts; he will not shirk business, if it avoids the repulsive form of sitting down indoors, and offers itself in combination with riding, hunting, galloping, cracking of rifles, and of colonial whips as loud as rifles, and drinking sunshine and moonshine in that mellow clime, beneath the Southern cross and the spangled firmament of stars unknown to us."

His own eyes sparkled like hot coals at this Bohemian picture.

Then he sighed and returned to civilization. "But," said he, "be ready with eighty thousand pounds for him, that he may enjoy his own way and join you in barring the entail. I forgot, I must say no more on that subject; I see it is as offensive — as it is inevitable. Cassandra has spoken wisely, and, I see, in vain. God bless you both — good night."

And he rolled out of the room with a certain clumsy importance.

Sir Charles treated all this advice with a polite forbearance while he was in the room, but on his departure delivered a sage reflection.

"Strange," said he, "that a man so valuable in any great emergency should be so extravagant and eccentric in the ordinary affairs of life. I might as well drive to Bellevue House and consult the first gentleman I met there."

Lady Bassett did not reply immediately, and Sir Charles observed that her face was very red and her hands trembled.

"Why, Bella," said he, "has all that rhodomontade upset you?"

Lady Bassett looked frightened at his noticing her agitation, and said that Mr. Rolfe always overpowered her. "He is so large, and so confident, and throws such new light on things."

"New light! Wild eccentricity always does that; but it is the light of Jack-o'-lan-

tern. On a great question, so near my heart as this, give me the steady light of common sense, not the wayward coruscations of a fiery imagination. Bella dear, I shall send the boy to a good school, and so cut off at one blow all the low associations that have caused the mischief."

"You know what is best, dear," said Lady Bassett; "you are wiser than any of us."

In the morning she got hold of Mr. Rolfe, and asked him if he could put her in the way of getting more than three per cent for her money *without risk*.

"Only one," said Rolfe. "London Freeholds in rising situations, let to substantial tenants. I can get you five per cent that way, if you are always ready to buy. The thing does not offer every day."

"I have twenty thousand pounds to dispose of so," said Lady Bassett.

"Very well," said Rolfe. "I'll look out for you, but Oldfield must examine titles and do the actual business. The best of that investment is, it is always improving; no ups and downs. Come," thought he, "Cassandra has not spoken quite in vain."

Sir Charles acted on his judgment, and in due course sent Mr. Bassett to a school at some distance, kept by a clergyman, who had the credit in that county of exercising sharp supervision and strict discipline.

Sir Charles made no secret of the boy's eccentricities. Mr. Beecher said he had one or two steady boys who assisted him in such cases.

Sir Charles thought that a very good idea; it was like putting a wild colt into the break with a steady horse.

He missed the boy sadly at first, but comforted himself with the conviction that he had parted with him for his good: that consoled him somewhat.

The younger children of Sir Charles and Lady Bassett were educated entirely by their mother, and taught as none but a loving lady can teach.

Compton, with whom we have to do, never knew the thorns with which the path of letters is apt to be strewn. A mistress of the great art of pleasing made knowledge from the first a primrose path to him. Sparkling all over with intelligence, she impregnated her boy with it. She made herself his favorite companion; she would not keep her distance. She stole and coaxed knowledge and goodness into his heart and mind with rare and loving cunning.

She taught him English and French and Latin on the Hamiltonian plan, and stored his young mind with history and biography, and read to him, and conversed with him on everything as they read it.

She taught him to speak the truth, and to be honorable and just.

She taught him to be polite, and even formal, rather than free and easy and rude. She taught him to be a man. He must not be what brave boys called a molley-coddle: like most womanly women she had a veneration for man, and she gave him her own high idea of the manly character.

Natural ability, and habitual contact with a mind so attractive and so rich, gave this intelligent boy many good ideas beyond his age.

When he was six years old, Lady Bassett made him pass his word of honor that he would never go into the stable-yard; and even then he was far enough advanced to keep his word religiously.

In return for this she let him taste some sweets of liberty, and was not always after him. She was profound enough to see that, without liberty, a noble character cannot be formed; and she husbanded the curb.

One day he represented to her that, in the meadow next their lawn, were great stripes of yellow, which were possibly cowslips; of course they might be only buttercups, but he hoped better things of them: he further reported that there was an iron gate between him and this paradise: he could get over it if not objectionable; but he thought it safest to ask her what she thought of the matter; was that iron gate intended to keep little boys from the cowslips, because, if so, it was a misfortune to which he must resign himself. Still, it *was* a misfortune. All this, of course, in the simple language of boyhood.

Then Lady Bassett smiled, and said "Suppose I were to lend you a key of that iron gate?"

"O mamma!"

"I have a great mind to."

"Then you will, you will."

"Does that follow?"

"Yes: whenever you say you think you'll do something kind, or you have a great mind to do it, you know you always do it; and that is one thing I do like you for, mamma, you are better than your word."

"Better than my word? Where does the child learn these things?"

"La, mamma, papa says that often."

"O, that accounts for it. I like the phrase very much. I wish I could think I deserved it. At any rate I will be as good as my word for once; you shall have a key of the gate."

The boy clapped his hands with delight.

The key was sent for, and, meantime, she told him one reason why she had trusted him with it was because he had been as good as his word about the stable.

The key was brought, and she held it up,

half playfully, and said, "There, sir, I deliver you this upon conditions: you must only use it when the weather is quite dry, because the grass in the meadow is longer, and will be wet. Do you promise?"

"Yes, mamma."

"And you must always lock the gate when you come back, and bring the key to one place — let me see — the drawer in the hall table, the one with marble on it; for you know a place for everything is our rule. On these conditions, I hereby deliver you this magic key, with the right of egress and ingress."

"Egress and ingress?"

"Egress and ingress."

"Is that foreign for cowslips, mamma — and oxlips?"

"Ha! ha! the child's head is full of cowslips. There is the Dictionary; look out Egress, and afterwards look out Ingress."

When he had added these two words to his little vocabulary, his mother asked him if he would be good enough to tell her why he did not care much about all the beautiful flowers in the garden, and was so excited about cowslips, which appeared to her a flower of no great beauty, and the smell rather sickly, begging his pardon.

This question posed him dreadfully: he looked at her in a sort of comic distress, and then sat gravely down all in a heap, about a yard off, to think.

"Finally he turned to her with a wry face, and said 'Why do I, mamma?'"

She smiled deliciously. "No, no, sir," said she. "How can I get inside your little head, and tell what is there? There must be a reason, I suppose; and you know you and I are never satisfied till we get at the reason of a thing. But there is no hurry, dear. I give you a week to find it out. Now run and open the gate — Stay, are there any cows in that field?"

"Sometimes, mamma; but they have no horns you know."

"Upon your word?"

"Upon my honor. I am not fond of them with horns, myself."

"Then run away, darling. But you must come and hunt me up, and tell me how you enjoyed yourself, because that makes *me* happy, you know."

This is mawkish; but it will serve to show on what terms the woman and boy were.

On second thoughts, I recall that apology, and defy creation. "THE MAWKISH" is a branch of literature, a great and popular one, and I have neglected it savagely.

Master Compton opened the iron gate, and the world was all before him where to choose.

He chose one of those yellow stripes that had so attracted him. Horror! it was all buttercups, and deil a cowslip.

Nevertheless, pursuing his researches, he found plenty of that delightful flower scattered about the meadow in thinner patches; and he gathered a double handful and dirtied his knees.

Returning, thus laden, from his first excursion, he was accosted by a fluty voice.

"Little boy!"

He looked up, and saw a girl standing on the lower bar of a little wooden gate painted white, looking over.

"Please bring me my ball," said she, pathetically.

Compton looked about, and saw a soft ball of many colors lying near.

He put down his cowslips gravely, and brought her the ball. He gave it her with a blush, because she was a strange girl: and she blushed a little, because he did.

He returned to his cowslips.

"Little boy!" said the voice, "please bring me my ball again."

He brought it her, with undisturbed politeness. She was giggling; he laughed too, at that.

"You did it on purpose that time," said he solemnly.

"La! you don't think I'd be so wicked," said she.

Compton shook his head doubtfully, and, considering the interview at an end, turned to go, when instantly the ball knocked his hat off, and nothing of the malefactor was visible, but a black eye sparkling with fun and mischief, and a bit of forehead wedged against the angle of the wall.

This being a challenge, Compton said, "Now you come out after that, and stand a shot, like a man."

The invitation to be masculine did not tempt her a bit; the only thing she put out was her hand, and that she drew in with a laugh, the moment he threw at it.

At this juncture, a voice cried, "Ruperta! what are you doing there?"

Ruperta made a rapid signal with her hand, to Compton, implying that he was to run away: and she herself walked demurely towards the person who had called her.

It was three days before Compton saw her again; and then she beckoned him royally to her.

"Little boy," said she, "talk to me."

Compton looked at her a little confounded, and did not reply.

"Stand on this gate, like me, and talk," said she.

He obeyed the first part of this mandate, and stood on the lower bar of the little gate; so their two figures made a V, when they hung back, and a tenpenny nail, when they came forward and met, and this motion they continued through the dialogue; and it was a pity the little wretches could not keep still, and send for my friend the English

Titian; for, when their heads were in position, it was indeed a pretty picture of childish and flower-like beauty and contrast; the boy fair, blue-eyed, and with exquisite golden hair; the girl black-eyed, black-browed, and with eyelashes of incredible length and beauty, and a cheek brownish, but tinted, and so glowing with health and vigor, that, pricked with a needle, it seemed ready to squirt carnation right into your eye.

She dazzled Master Compton so, that he could do nothing but look at her.

"Well?" said she, smiling.

"Well," replied he, pretending her "well" was not an interrogatory, but a concise statement, and that he had discharged the whole duty of man by according a prompt and cheerful consent.

"You begin," said the lady.

"No, you."

"What for?"

"Because—I think—you are the cleverest."

"Good little boy! Well then, I will. Who are you?"

"I am Compton. Who are you, please?"

"I am Ruperta."

"I never heard that name before."

"No more did I. I think they measured me for it: you live in the great house there, don't you?"

"Yes, Ruperta."

"Well then, I live in the little house. It is not very little either. It's Highmore. I saw you in church one day; is that lady with the hair your mamma?"

"Yes, Ruperta."

"She is beautiful."

"Is n't she?"

"But mine is so good."

"Mine is very good too, Ruperta. Wonderfully good."

"I like you, Compton—a little."

"I like you a good deal, Ruperta."

"La, do you? I wonder at that: you are like a cherub, and I am such a black thing."

"But that is why I like you. Reginald is darker than you, and O so beautiful."

"Hum!—he is a very bad boy."

"No, he is not."

"Don't tell stories, child; he is. I know all about him. A wicked, vulgar, bad boy."

"He is not," cried Compton, almost snivelling: but he altered his mind, and fired up. "You are a naughty story-telling girl, to say that."

"Bless me!" said Ruperta, coloring high, and tossing her head haughtily.

"I don't like you *now*, Ruperta," said Compton, with all the decent calmness of a settled conviction.

"You don't?" screamed Ruperta. "Then go about your business directly, and don't

never come here again! — Scolding *me!* — How dare you? — oh! oh! oh!” and the little lady went off slowly, with her finger in her eye: and Master Compton looked rather rueful, as we all do, when this charming sex has recourse to what may be called “liquid reasoning.” I have known the most solid reasons unable to resist it.

However “*mens conscia recti*,” and, above all, the cowslips, enabled Compton to resist, and he troubled his head no more about her that day.

But he looked out for her the next day, and she did not come; and that rather disappointed him.

The next day was wet, and he did not go into the meadow, being on honor not to do so.

The fourth day was lovely, and he spent a long time in the meadow, in hopes: he saw her for a moment at the gate; but she speedily retired.

He was disappointed.

However, he collected a good store of cowslips, and then came home.

As he passed the door out popped Ruperta from some secret ambush, and said, “Well?”

“Well,” replied Compton.

“Are you better, dear?”

“I’m very well, thank you,” said the boy.

“In your mind, I mean. You were cross last time, you know.”

Compton remembered his mother’s lessons about manly behavior, and said, in a jaunty way, “Well, I s’pose I was a little cross.”

Now the other cunning little thing had come to apologize, if there was no other way to recover her admirer. But, on this confession, she said, “O, if you are sorry for it, I forgive you. You may come and talk.”

Then Compton came and stood on the gate, and they held a long conversation; and, having quarrelled last time, parted now with rather violent expressions of attachment.

After that they made friends and laid their little hearts bare to each other; and it soon appeared that Compton had learned more, but Ruperta had thought more for her self, and was sorely puzzled about many things, and of a vastly inquisitive mind. “Why,” said she, “is good things so hard, and bad things so nice and easy? It would be much better if good things was nice and bad ones nasty. That is the way I’d have it, if I could make things.”

Mr. Compton shook his head and said many things were very hard to understand, and even his mamma sometimes could not make out all the things.

“Nor mine neither; I puzzle her dreadful.

I can’t help that; things should n’t come and puzzle me, and then I should n’t puzzle her. Shall I tell you my puzzles, and perhaps you can answer them, because you are a boy. I can’t think why it is wicked for me to dig in my little garden on a Sunday, and is n’t wicked for Jessie to cook and Sarah to make the beds. Can’t think why mamma told papa not to be cross, and, when I told her not to be cross, she put me in a dark cupboard all among the dreadful mice, till I screamed so she took me out and kissed me and gave me pie. Can’t think why papa called Sally ‘Something’ for spilling the ink over his papers, and when I called the gardener the very same for robbing my flowers, all their hands and eyes went up, and they said I was a shocking girl. Can’t think why papa giggled the next moment, if I was a shocking girl: it is all puzzle — puzzle — puzzle.”

One day she said, “Can you tell me where all the bad people are buried? for that puzzles me dreadful.”

Compton was posed at first, but said at last he thought they were buried in the churchyard, along with the good ones.

“O indeed!” said she, with an air of pity. “Pray, have you ever been in the churchyard, and read the writings on the stones?”

“No.”

“Then I have. I have read every single word; and there are none but good people buried *there*, not one.” She added, rather pathetically, “You should not answer me without thinking, as if things was easy, instead of so hard. Well, one comfort, there are not many wicked people hereabouts; they live in towns; so I suppose they are buried in the garden, poor things, or put in the water with a stone.”

Compton had no more plausible theory ready, and declined to commit himself to Ruperta’s; so that topic fell to the ground.

One day he found her perched as usual, but with her bright little face overclouded.

By this time the intelligent boy was fond enough of her to notice her face.

“What’s the matter, Perta?”

“Ruperta. The matter? Puzzled again! It is very serious this time.”

“Tell me, Ruperta.”

“No, dear.”

“Please.”

The young lady fixed her eyes on him, and said, with a pretty solemnity, “Let us play at Catechism.”

“I don’t know that game.”

“The governess asks questions, and the good little boy answers. That’s Catechism. I’m the governess.”

“Then I’m the good little boy.”

“Yes, dear; and so now look me full in the face.”

"There — you're very pretty, Ruperta."
 "Don't be giddy; I'm hideous; so behave, and answer all my questions. O, I'm so unhappy. Answer me, is young people, or old people, goodest?"

"You should say best, dear. Good, better, best. Why, old people, to be sure — much."

"So I thought; and that is why I am so puzzled. Then your papa and mine are much betterer — will that do? — than we are?"

"Of course they are."

"There he goes! Such a child for answering slap bang I never."

"I'm not a child. I'm older than you are, Ruperta."

"That's a story."

"Well, then, I'm as old; for Mary says we were born the same day — the same hour — the same minute."

"La! we are twins."

She paused, however, on this discovery, and soon found reason to doubt her hasty conclusion. "No such thing," said she: "they tell me the bells were ringing for you being found, and then I was found — to catechism you."

"There, then you see I *am* older than you, Ruperta."

"Yes, dear," said Ruperta, very gravely, "I'm younger in my body, but older in my head."

This matter being settled, so that neither party could complain, since antiquity was evenly distributed, the catechizing recommenced.

"Do you believe in 'Let dogs delight'?"

"I don't know."

"What!" screamed Ruperta. "O you wicked boy! Why, it comes next after Bible."

"Then I do believe it," said Compton, who, to tell the truth, had been merely puzzled by the verb, and was not afflicted with any doubt that the composition referred to was a divine oracle.

"Good boy!" said Ruperta, patronizingly. "Well, then, this is what puzzles me; your papa and mine don't believe in 'Dogs delight.' They have been quarrelling this twelve years and more, and mean to go on, in spite of mamma. She is good. Did n't you know that your papa and mine are great enemies?"

"No, Ruperta. O, what a pity!"

"Don't, Compton, don't: there, you have made me cry."

He set himself to console her.

She consented to be consoled.

But she said, with a sigh, "What becomes of old people being better than young ones, now? Are you and I bears and lions? Do we scratch out each other's eyes? It is all puzzle, puzzle, puzzle. I wish I was dead!

Nurse says, when I'm dead I shall understand it all. But I don't know; I saw a dead cat once, and she did n't seem to know as much as before; puzzle, puzzle. Compton, do you think they are puzzled in heaven?"

"No."

"Then the sooner we both go there, the better."

"Yes, but not just now."

"Why not?"

"Because of the cowslips."

"Here's a boy! What, would you rather be among the cowslips than the angels? and think of the diamonds and pearls that heaven is paved with."

"But you might n't be there."

"What! Am I a wicked girl, then, — wickeder than you, that is a boy?"

"O no, no, no; but see how big it is up there"; they cast their eyes up, and, taking the blue vault for creation, were impressed with its immensity. "I know where to find you here, but up there you might be ever so far off me."

"La! so I might. Well, then, we had better keep quiet. I suppose we shall get wiser as we get older. But, Compton, I'm so sorry your papa and mine are bears and lions. Why does n't the clergyman scold them?"

"Nobody dare scold my papa," said Compton, proudly. Then, after reflection, "Perhaps, when we are older, we may persuade them to make friends. I think it is very stupid to quarrel; don't you?"

"As stupid as an owl."

"You and I had a quarrel once, Ruperta."

"Yes, you misbehaved."

"No, no; you were cross."

"Story! Well, never mind: we *did* quarrel. And you were miserable directly."

"Not so very," said Compton, tossing his head.

"I *was*, then," said Ruperta, with unguarded candor.

"So was I."

"Good boy! Kiss me, dear."

"There — and there — and there — and —"

"That will do. I want to talk, Compton."

"Yes, dear."

"I'm not very sure, but I rather think, I'm in love with you, — a little, little bit, you know."

"And I'm sure I'm in love with you, Ruperta."

"Over head an' ears?"

"Yes."

"Then I love you to distraction. Both — er the gate. If it was n't for that, I could run in the meadow with you: and marry you perhaps, and so gather cowslips together for ever and ever."

"Let us open it."

"You can't."

"Let us try."

"I have. It won't be opened."

"Let me try. Some gates want to be lifted up a little, and then they will open. There, I told you so."

The gate came open.

Ruperta uttered an exclamation of delight, and then drew back.

"I'm afraid, Compton," said she, "papa would be angry."

She wanted Compton to tempt her; but that young gentleman, having a strong sense of filial duty, omitted so to do.

When she saw he would not persuade her, she dispensed. "Come along," said she, "if it is only for five minutes."

She took his hand, and away they scampered. He showed her the cowslips, the violets, and all the treasures of the meadow; but it was all hurry, and skurry, and excitement; no time to look at anything above half a minute, for fear of being found out; and so, at last, back to the gate, beaming with stolen pleasure, glowing and sparkling with heat and excitement.

The cunning thing made him replace the gate, and then, after saying she must go for about an hour, marched demurely back to the house.

After one or two of these hasty trips, impunity gave her a sense of security, and, the weather getting warm, she used to sit in the meadow with her beau and weave wreaths of cowslips, and place them in her black hair, and for Compton she made coronets of bluebells, and adorned his golden head.

And, sometimes, for a little while, she would nestle close to him, and lean her head, with all the feminine grace of a mature woman, on his shoulder.

Said she, "A boy's shoulder does very nice for a girl to put her nose on."

One day the aspiring girl asked him what was that forest.

"That is Bassett's wood."

"I will go there with you some day, when papa is out."

"I'm afraid that is too far for you," said Compton.

"Nothing is too far for me," replied the ardent girl. "Why, how far is it?"

"More than half a mile."

"Is it very big?"

"Immense."

"Belong to the Queen?"

"No, to papa."

"Oh!"

And here my reader may well ask what was Lady Bassett about, or did Compton, with all his excellent teaching, conceal all this from his mother and his friend.

On the contrary, he went openmouthed to her and told her he had seen such a pretty

little girl, and gave her a brief account of their conversation.

Lady Bassett was startled at first and greatly perplexed. She told him he must on no account go to her; if he spoke to her, it must be on papa's ground. She even made him pledge his honor to that.

More than that she did not like to say. She thought it unnecessary and undesirable to transmit to another generation the unhappy feud by which she had suffered so much, and was even then suffering. Moreover, she was as much afraid of Richard Bassett as ever. If he chose to tell his girl not to speak to Compton, he might. She was resolved not to go out of her way to affront him, through his daughter. Besides, that might wound Mrs. Bassett, if it got round to her ears; and, although she had never spoken to Mrs. Bassett, yet their eyes had met in church, and always with a pacific expression. Indeed, Lady Bassett felt sure she had read in that meek woman's face a regret that they were not friends, and could not be friends, because of their husbands. Lady Bassett, then, for these reasons, would not forbid Compton to be kind to Ruperta in moderation.

Whether she would have remained as neutral had she known how far these young things were going, is quite another matter; but Compton's narratives to her were, naturally enough, very tame compared with the reality, and she never dreamed that two seven-year-olds could form an attachment so warm as these little plagues were doing.

And, to conclude, about the time when Mr. Compton first opened the gate for his innamorata, Lady Bassett's mind was diverted, in some degree, even from her beloved boy Compton, by a new trouble, and a host of passions it excited in her own heart.

A thunder-clap fell on Sir Charles Bassett, in the form of a letter from Reginald's tutor, informing him that Reginald and another lad had been caught wiring hares in a wood at some distance, and were now in custody.

Sir Charles mounted his horse, and rode to the place, leaving Lady Bassett a prey to great anxiety and bitter remorse.

Sir Charles came back in two days, with the galling news that his son and heir was in prison for a month, all his exertions having only prevailed to get the case summarily dealt with.

Reginald's companion, a young gypsy, aged seventeen, had got three months, it being assumed that he was the tempter: the reverse was the case though.

When Sir Charles told Lady Bassett all this, with a face of agony, and a broken voice, her heart almost burst: she threw every other consideration to the winds.

"Charles," she cried, "I can't bear it. I can't see your heart wrung any more, and your affections blighted. Tear that young viper out of your breast: don't go on wasting your heart's blood on a stranger; HE IS NOT YOUR SON."

CHAPTER THE THIRTY-SECOND.

At this monstrous declaration, from the very lips of the man's wife, there was a dead silence, Sir Charles being struck dumb, and Lady Bassett herself terrified at the sound of the words she had uttered.

After a terrible pause, Sir Charles fixed his eyes on her, with an awful look, and said, very slowly "Will — you — have — the — goodness — to — say that again? but first think what you are saying."

This made Lady Bassett shake in every limb; indeed the very flesh of her body quivered. Yet she persisted, but in a tone that, of itself, showed how fast her courage was ebbing. She faltered out, almost inaudibly, "I say you must waste no more love on him — he is not your son."

Sir Charles looked at her to see if she was in her senses: it was not the first time he had suspected her of being deranged on this one subject. But no: she was pale as death, she was cringing, wincing, quivering, and her eyes roving to and fro; a picture not of frenzy, but of guilt unhardened.

He began to tremble in his turn, and was so horror-stricken and agitated that he could hardly speak. "Am I dreaming?" he gasped.

Lady Bassett saw the storm she had raised, and would have given the world to recall her words.

"Whose is he, then?" asked Sir Charles, in a voice scarcely human.

"I don't know," said Lady Bassett, doggedly.

"Then how dare you say that he is n't mine?"

"Kill me, Charles," cried she, passionately; "but don't look at me so, and speak to me so. Why I say he is not yours, is he like you, either in face or mind?"

"And he is like — whom?"

Lady Bassett had lost all her courage by this time: she whimpered out, "Like nobody except the gypsies."

"Bella, this is a subject which will part you and me for life unless we can agree upon it —"

No reply, in words, from Lady Bassett.

"So please let us understand each other. Your son is not my son. Is that what you look me in the face and tell me?"

"Charles, I never said that. How could I be my son, and not be yours?"

And she raised her eyes, and looked him full in the face: no fear nor cringing now: the woman was majestic.

Sir Charles was a little alarmed in his turn; for his wife's soft eyes flamed battle for the first time in her life.

"Now, you talk sense," said he; "if he is yours, he is mine; and, as he is certainly yours, this is a very foolish conversation, which must not be renewed, otherwise —"

"I shall be insulted by my own husband?"

"I think it very probable. And, as I do not choose you to be insulted, nor to think yourself insulted, I forbid you ever to recur to this subject."

"I will obey, Charles; but let me say one word first. When I was alone in London, and hardly sensible, might not this child have been imposed upon me and you? I'm sure he was."

"By whom?"

"How can I tell? — I was alone — that woman in the house had a bad face — the gypsies do these things, I've heard."

"The gypsies. And why not the fairies?" said Sir Charles, contemptuously. "Is that all you have to suggest — before we close the subject forever?"

"Yes," said Lady Bassett, sorrowfully. "I see you take me for a mad woman; but time will show. O, that I could persuade you to detach your affections from that boy, — he will break your heart else, — and rest them on the children that resemble us in mind and features."

"These partialities are allowed to mothers; but a father must be just. Reginald is my first-born; he came to me from Heaven at a time when I was under a bitter trial, and from the day he was born till this day I have been a happy man. It is not often a father owes so much to a son as I do to my darling boy. He is dear to my heart in spite of his faults; and now I pity him, as well as love him, since it seems he has only one parent, poor little fellow."

Lady Bassett opened her mouth to reply, but could not. She raised her hands in mute despair, then quietly covered her face with them, and soon the tears trickled through her white fingers.

Sir Charles looked at her, and was touched at her silent grief.

"My darling wife," said he, "I think this is the only thing you and I cannot agree upon. Why not be wise as well as loving, and avoid it?"

"I will never seek it again," sobbed Lady Bassett. "But, O," she cried, with sudden wildness, "something tells me it will meet me, and follow me, and rob me of my husband. Well, when that day comes, I shall know how to die."

And with this she burst away from him,

like some creature who has been stung past endurance.

Sir Charles often meditated on this strange scene: turn it how he could, he came back to the same conclusion, that she must have an hallucination on this subject. He said to himself, "If Bella really believed the boy was a changeling, she would act upon her conviction, she would urge me to take some steps to recover our true child, whom the gypsies or the fairies have taken, and given us poor dear Reginald instead."

But still the conversation, and her strange looks of terror, lay dormant in his mind; both were too remarkable to be ever forgotten. Such things lie like certain seeds, awaiting only fresh accidents to spring into life.

The month rolled away, and the day came for Reginald's liberation. A dog-cart was sent for him, and the heir of the Bassett's emerged from a county jail, and uttered a whoop of delight; he insisted on driving, and went home at a rattling pace.

He was in high spirits till he got in sight of Huntercombe Hall; and then it suddenly occurred to his mercurial mind that he should probably not be received with an ovation, petty larceny being a novelty in that ancient house whose representative he was.

When he did get there, he found the whole family in such a state of commotion that his return was hardly noticed at all.

Master Compton's dinner hour was two P. M., and yet, at three o'clock of this day, he did not come in.

This was reported to Lady Bassett, and it gave her some little anxiety; for she suspected he might possibly be in the company of Ruperta Bassett; and, although she did not herself much object to that, she objected very much to have it talked about and made a fuss. So she went herself to the end of the lawn, and out into the meadow, that a servant might not find the young people together, if her suspicion was correct.

She went into the meadow and called "Compton!—Compton!" as loud as she could, but there was no reply.

Then she came in, and began to be alarmed, and sent servants about in all directions.

But two hours elapsed, and there were no tidings. The thing looked serious.

She sent out grooms well mounted to scour the country. One of these fell in with Sir Charles, who thereupon came home, and found his wife in a pitiable state. She was sitting in an arm-chair, trembling and crying hysterically.

She caught his hand directly, and grasped it like a vice.

"It is Richard Bassett!" she cried. "He

knows how to wound and kill me. He has stolen our child."

Sir Charles hurried out, and, soon after that, Reginald arrived, and stood awestruck at her deplorable condition.

Sir Charles came back heated and anxious, kissed Reginald, told him in three words his brother was missing, and then informed Lady Bassett that he had learned something very extraordinary; Richard Bassett's little girl had also disappeared, and his people were out, looking after her.

"Ah! they are together," cried Lady Bassett.

"Together? a son of mine consorting with that viper's brood!"

"What does that poor child know? O, find him for me, if you love that dear child's mother!"

Sir Charles hurried out directly, but was met at the door by a servant, who blurted out, "The men have dragged the fish-ponds, Sir Charles, and they want to know if they shall drag the brook."

"Hold your tongue, idiot," cried Sir Charles, and thrust him out; but the wiseacre had not spoken in vain. Lady Bassett moaned, and went into worse hysterics, with nobody near her but Reginald.

That worthy, never having seen a lady in hysterics, and not being hardened at all points, uttered a sympathetic howl, and flung his arms round her neck. "Oh! oh! oh! Don't cry, mamma."

Lady Bassett shuddered at his touch, but did not repel him.

"I'll find him for you," said the boy, "if you will leave off crying."

She stared in his face a moment, and then went on as before.

"Mamma!" said he, getting impatient, "do listen to me. I'll find him easy enough, if you will only listen."

"You!—you!" and she stared wildly at him.

"Ay, I know a sight more than the fools about here. I'm a poacher. Just you put me on to his track. I'll soon run into him, if he is above ground."

"A child like you!" cried Lady Bassett, "how can you do that?" and she began to wring her hands again.

"I'll show you," said the boy, getting very impatient, "if you will just leave off crying like a great baby, and come to any place you like where he has been to-day and left a mark."

"Ah!" cried Lady Bassett.

"I'm a poacher," repeated Reginald, quite proudly; "you forget that."

"Come with me," cried Lady Bassett, starting up.

She whipped on her bonnet, and ran with him down the lawn.

"There, Reginald," said she, panting, "I

think my darling was here this afternoon; yes, yes, he must; for he had a key of the door, and it is open."

"All right," said Reginald; "come into the field."

He ran about, like a dog hunting, and soon found marks among the cowslips.

"Somebody has been gathering a nose-gay here to-day," said he; "now, mamma, there's only two ways out of this field, let us go straight to that gate; that is the likeliest."

Near the gate was some clay, and Reginald showed her several prints of small feet.

"Look," said he, "here's the track of two,—one's a gal; how I know, here's a sole to this shoe no wider nor a knife. Come on."

In the next field he was baffled for a long time; but at last he found a place in a dead hedge, where they had gone through.

"See," said he, "these twigs are fresh broken, and here's a bit of the gal's frock. Oh! won't she catch it?"

"O you brave, clever boy!" cried Lady Bassett.

"Come on!" shouted the urchin.

He hunted like a beagle, and saw like a bird, with his savage glittering eye. He was on fire with the ardor of the chase; and, not to dwell too long on what has been so often and so well written by others, in about an hour and a half he brought the anxious, palpitating, but now hopeful mother, to the neighborhood of Bassett's wood. Here he trusted to his own instinct. "They have gone into the wood," said he, "and I don't blame 'em. I found my way here long before his age. I say, don't you tell; I've snared plenty of the Governor's hares in that wood."

He got to the edge of the wood and ran down the side. At last he found the marks of small feet on a low bank, and, darting over it, discovered the fainter traces on some decaying leaves inside the wood.

"There," said he; "now it is just as if you had got them in your pocket, for they'll never find their way out of this wood. Bless your heart, why, I used to get lost in it at first."

"Lost in the wood!" cried Lady Bassett, "but he will die of fear, or be eaten by wild beasts; and it is getting so dark."

"What about that? Night or day is all one to me. What will you give me, if I find him before midnight?"

"Anything I've got in the world."

"Give me a sovereign?"

"A thousand!"

"Give me a kiss?"

"A hundred."

"Then I'll tell you what I'll do,—I don't mind a little trouble, to stop your crying, mamma, because you are the right sort,—

I'll get the village out, and we will tread the wood, with torches an' all for them as can't see by night; I can see all one; and you shall have your kid home to supper. You see there's heavy dew, and he is not like me that would rather sleep in this wood than the best bed in London city; a night in a wood would about settle his hash. So here goes. I can run a mile in six minutes and a half."

With these words, the strange boy was off like an arrow from a bow.

Lady Bassett, exhausted by anxiety and excitement, was glad to sit down; her trembling heart would not let her leave the place, that she now began to hope contained her child. She sat down and waited patiently.

The sun set, the moon rose, the stars glittered; the infinite leaves stood out dark and solid as if cut out of black marble; all was dismal silence and dread suspense to the solitary watcher.

Yet the lady of Huntercombe Hall sat on, sick at heart, but patient, beneath that solemn sky.

She shuddered a little as the cold dews gathered on her, for she was a woman nursed in Luxury's lap; but she never moved.

The silence was dismal. Had that wild boy forgotten his promise, or were there no parents in the village, that their feet lagged so?

It was nearly ten o'clock, when her keen ears, strained to the utmost, discovered a faint buzzing of voices; but where she could not tell.

The sounds increased, and increased, and then there was a temporary silence; and after that a faint halloing in the wood to her right. The wood was five hundred acres, and the bulk of it lay in front and to her left.

The halloing got louder and louder; the whole wood seemed to echo; her heart beat high; lights glimmered nearer and nearer, hares and rabbits pattered by, and startled her, and pheasants thundered off their roosts with an incredible noise, owls flitted, and bats innumerable, disturbed and terrified by the glaring lights and loud resounding halloes.

Nearer, nearer came the sounds, till at last a line of men and boys, full fifty, carrying torches and lanterns, came up, and lighted up the dew-spangled leaves, and made the mother's heart leap with joyful hope at succor so powerful.

O, she could have kissed the stout village blacksmith, whose deep sonorous lungs rang close to her. Never had any man's voice sounded to her so like a god's, as this stout blacksmith's "hilloop! hilloop!" close and loud in her ear, and those at the end of the line halloed "hillo-op! hillo-op!" like an

echo; and so they passed on, through bush and brier, till their voices died away in the distance.

A boy detached himself from the line, and ran to Lady Bassett, with a travelling-rug. It was Reginald.

"You put on this," said he. He shook it, and standing on tip-toe, put it over her shoulders.

"Thank you, dear," said she. "Where is papa?"

"O, he is in the line, and the Highmore swell and all."

"Mr. Richard Bassett!"

"Ay, his kid is out on the loose, as well as ours."

"O Reginald, if they should quarrel!"

"Why, our governor can lick *him*, can't he?"

CHAPTER THE THIRTY-THIRD.

"O, don't talk so. I would n't for all the world they should quarrel."

"Well, we have got enough fellows to part them, if they do."

"Dear Reginald, you have been so good to me, and you are so clever; speak to some of the men, and let there be no more quarrelling between papa and that man."

"All right," said the boy.

"On second thoughts, take *me* to papa; I'll be by his side, and then they cannot."

"You want to walk through the wood? that is a good joke. Why, it is like walking through a river, and the young wood slapping your eyes, for you can't see every twig by this light, and the leaves sponging your face and shoulders; and the briers would soon strip your gown into ribbons, and make your little ankles bleed. No, you are a lady; you stay where you are, and let us men work it. We sha' n't find him yet awhile. I must get near the Governor. When we find my lord, I'll give a whistle you could hear a mile off."

"O Reginald, are you sure he is in the wood?"

"I'd bet my head to a chany orange. You might as well ask me, when I track a badger to his hole, and no signs of his going out again, whether old long-claws is there. I wish I was as sure of never going back to school as I am of finding that little lot. The only thing I don't like, is the young muff's not giving us a hallo back. But, any way, I'll find 'em, *alive or dead*."

And, with this pleasing assurance, the little imp scudded off, leaving the mother glued to the spot with terror.

For full an hour more the torches gleamed, though fainter and fainter, and so

full was the wood of echoes, that the voices, though distant, seemed to hallo all round the agonized mother.

But presently there was a continuous yell, quite different from the isolated shouts, a distant but unmistakable howl of victory that made a bolt of ice shoot down her back, and then her heart to glow like fire.

It was followed by a keen whistle.

She fell on her knees and thanked God for her boy.

In the middle of this wood was a shallow excavation, an old chalk-pit, unused for many years. It was never deep, and had been half filled up with dead leaves: these, once blown into the hollow, or dropped from the trees, had accumulated.

The very middle of the line struck on this place, and Moss, the old keeper, who was near the centre, had no sooner cast his eyes into it than he halted, and uttered a stentorian hallo well known to sportsmen, — "SEE — HO!"

A dead halt, a low murmur, and, in a very few seconds, the line was a circle, and all the torches, that had not expired, held high in a flaming ring, over the prettiest little sight that wood had ever presented.

The old keeper had not given tongue on conjecture, like some youthful hound. In a little hollow of leaves, which the boy had scraped out, lay Master Compton and Miss Ruperta, on their little backs, each with an arm round the other's neck, enjoying the sweet sound sleep of infancy, which neither the horror of their situation — Babes in the wood — nor the shouts of fifty people had in the smallest degree disturbed; to be sure they had undergone great fatigue.

Young Master wore a coronet of blue-bells on his golden head: young Miss a wreath of cowslips on her ebony locks. The pair were flowers, cherubs, children, everything that stands for young, tender, and lovely.

The honest villagers gaped, and roared in chorus, and held high their torches, and gazed with reverential delight. Not for them was it to finger the little gentlefolks, but only to devour them with admiring eyes.

Indeed, the picture was carried home to many a humble hearth, and is spoken of to this day in Huntercombe village.

But the pale and anxious fathers were in no state to see pictures; they only saw their children; Sir Charles and Richard Bassett came round with the general rush, saw, and dashed into the pit.

Strange to say, neither knew the other was there: each seized his child, and tore it away from the contact of the other child, as if from a viper; in which natural but harsh act they saw each other for the first

come with me; we'll go the short cut, and be home as soon as them."

She complied, though trembling all over.

On the way he told her where the children had been discovered, and in what attitude.

"Little darlings!" said she. "But he has frightened his poor mother, and nearly broken her heart. Oh "

"If you cry any more, mamma — Shut up, I tell you."

"Must I? Oh!"

"Yes, or you'll catch pepper."

Then he pulled her along, gabbling all the time. "Those two swells did n't quarrel, after all, you see."

"Thank Heaven!"

"But they looked at each other like hobelikes, and pulled the kids away like pison. Ha, ha! I say, the young 'uns ain't of the same mind as the old 'uns. I say, though, our Compton is not a bad sort; I'm blowed if he had n't taken off his tippet to put round his gal. I say, don't you think that little chap has begun rather early? Why, I did n't trouble my head about the gals till I was eleven years old."

Lady Bassett was too much agitated to discuss these delicate little questions just then.

She replied as irrelevantly as ever a lady did. "O you good, brave, clever boy!" said she.

Then she stopped a moment to kiss him heartily. "I shall never forget this night, dear. I shall always make excuses for you. O, shall we never get home?"

"We shall be home as soon as they will," said Reginald. "Come on."

He gabbled to her the whole way; but the reader has probably had enough of his mill-clack.

Lady Bassett reached home, and had just ordered a large fire in Compton's bedroom, when Sir Charles came in, bringing the boy.

The lady ran out screaming, and went down on her knees, with her arms out, as only a mother can stretch them to her child.

There was not a word of scolding that night. He had made her suffer; but what of that? She had no egotism; she was a true mother. Her boy had been lost, and was found; and she was the happiest soul in creation.

But the fathers of these Babes in the wood were both intensely mortified, and took measures to keep those little lovers apart in future. Richard Bassett locked up his gate: Sir Charles padlocked his; and they both told their wives they really must be more vigilant.

The poor children, being in disgrace, did not venture to remonstrate. But they used often to think of each other, and took a

liking to the British Sunday; for then they saw each other in church.

By and by even that consolation ceased. Ruperta was sent to school, and passed her holidays at the sea-side.

To return to Reginald, he was compelled to change his clothes that evening, but was allowed to sit up, and, when the heads of the house were a little calmer, became the hero of the night.

Sir Charles, gazing on him with parental pride, said, "Reginald, you have begun a new life to-day, and begun it well. Let us forget the past, and start fresh to-day, with the love and gratitude of both your parents."

The boy hung his head, and said nothing in reply.

Lady Bassett came to his assistance. "He will: he will. Don't say a word about the past. He is a good, brave, beautiful boy; and I adore him."

"And I like you, mamma," said Reginald, graciously.

From that day, the boy had a champion in Lady Bassett: and, Heaven knows, she had no sinecure; poor Reginald's virtues were too eccentric to balance his faults for long together. His parents could not have a child lost in a wood every day; but good taste and propriety can be offended every hour, when one is so young, active, and savage, as Master Reginald.

He was up at five, and doing wrong all day.

Hours in the stables, learning to talk horsey, and smell dunghilly.

Hours in the village — gossiping and romping.

In good company, an owl.

In bad, or low, company, a cricket, a nightingale, a magpie.

He was seen at a neighboring fair, playing the fiddle in a booth to dancing yokels, and receiving their pence.

He was caught by Moss wiring hares in Bassett's wood, within twenty yards of the place where he had found the Babes in the wood so nobly.

Remonstrated with tenderly and solemnly, he informed Sir Charles that poaching was a thing he could not live without, and he modestly asked to have Bassett's wood given him to poach in, offering, as a consideration, to keep all other poachers out: as a greater inducement he represented that he should not require a house, but only a coarse sheet to stretch across an old saw-pit, and a pair of blankets for winter use; one under; one over.

Sir Charles was often sad, sometimes indignant.

Lady Bassett excused each enormity with pathetic ingenuity; excused, but suffered, and indeed pined visibly, for all this time

he was tormenting her as few women in her position have been tormented. Her life was a struggle of contesting emotions; she was wounded, harassed, perplexed, and so miserable, she would have welcomed Death, that her husband might read that Manuscript, and cease to suffer, and she escape the shame of confessing, and of living after it.

In one word she was expiating.

Neither the excuses she made, nor the misery she suffered, escaped Sir Charles.

He said to her at last, "My own Bella, this unhappy boy is killing you. Dear as he is to me, you are dearer. I must send him away again."

"He saved our darling," said she, faintly; but she could say no more. He had exhausted excuse.

Sir Charles made inquiries everywhere, and, at last, his attention was drawn to the following advertisement in the *Times* —

UNMANAGEABLE, Backward, or other BOYS, carefully TRAINED and EDUCATED, by a married rector. Home comforts. Moderate terms. Address Dr. Beecher, Fennyngore, Cambridgeshire.

He wrote to this gentleman, and the correspondence was encouraging. "These scapegraces," said the artist in tuition, "are like crab-trees; abominable till you graft them, and then they bear the best fruit."

While the letters were passing, came a climax. Reckless Reginald could keep no bounds intact: his inward definition of a boundary was "a thing you should go a good way out of your way rather than not overleap."

Accordingly he was often on Highmore farm at night, and even in Highmore garden; the boundary wall tempted him so.

One light, but windy night, when everybody that could put his head under cover, and keep it there, did, reckless Reginald was out enjoying the fresh breezes; he mounted the boundary wall of Highmore like a cat, to see what amusement might offer. Thus perched, he speedily discovered a bright light in Highmore dining-room.

He dropped from the wall directly, and stole softly over the grass, and peered in at the window.

He saw a table with a powerful lamp on it: on that table, and gleaming in that light, were several silver vessels of rare size and workmanship: and Mr. Bassett, with his coat off, and a green baize apron on, was cleaning one of these with brush and leather. He had already cleaned the others, for they glittered prodigiously.

Reginald's black eye gloated and glittered at this unexpected display of wealth in so dazzling a form.

But this was nothing to the revelation in store. When Mr. Bassett had done with that piece of plate, he went to the panelled wall, and opened a door so nicely adapted to the panels, that a stranger would hardly

have discovered it. Yet it was an enormous door, and, being opened, revealed a still larger closet, lined with green velvet, and fitted with shelves from floor to ceiling.

Here shone, in all their glory, the old plate of two good families: that is to say, half the old plate of the Bassetts, and all the old plate of the Goodwyns, from whom came Highmore to Richard Bassett through his mother Ruperta Goodwyn, so named after her grandmother so named after her aunt; so named after her godmother; so named after her father, Prince Rupert, cavalier, chemist, glass-blower, etc. etc.

The wall seemed ablaze with suns and moons, for many of the chased goblets, plates, and dishes, were silver-gilt: none of your filmy electro-plate, but gold laid on thick, by the old mercurial process, in days when they that wrought in precious metals were honest — for want of knowing how to cheat.

Glued to the pane, gloating on this constellation of gold suns and silver moons, and trembling with Bohemian excitement, reckless Reginald heard not a stealthy step upon the grass behind him.

He had trusted to a fact in optics, forgetting the doctrine of shadows.

The Scotch servant saw from a pantry window the shadow of a cap projected on the grass, with a face, and part of a body. She stepped out, and got upon the grass.

Finding it was only a boy, she was brave, as well as cunning; and, owing to the wind, and his absorption, stole on him unheard, and pinned him with her strong hands by both his shoulders.

Young Hopeful uttered a screech of dismay, and administered a back kick that made Jessie limp for two days, and scream very lustily for the present.

Mr. Bassett, at this dialogue of yells, dropped a coffee-pot with a crash and a tinkle, and ran out directly, and secured young Hopeful, who thereupon began to quake and remonstrate.

"I was only taking a look," said he; "where 's the harm of that?"

"You were trespassing, sir," said Richard Bassett.

"What is the harm of that, Governor? You can come all over our place, for what I care."

"Thank you. I prefer to keep to my own place."

"Well, I don't. I say, old chap, don't hit me. 'T was I put 'em all on the scent of your kid, you know."

"So I have heard. Well, then, this makes us quits."

"Don't it? You ain't such a bad sort, after all."

"Only mind, Mr. Bassett, if I catch you prying here again, that will be a fresh account, and I shall open it with a horsewhip."

He then gave him a little push, and the boy fled like the wind. When he was gone Richard Bassett became rather uneasy. He had hitherto concealed, even from his own family, the great wealth his humble home contained. His secret was now public. Reginald had no end of low companions. If burglars got scent of this, it might be very awkward. At last he hit upon a defence. He got one of those hooks ending in a screw, which are used for pictures, and screwed it into the inside of the cupboard door near the top. To this he fastened a long piece of catgut, and carried it through the floor. His bed was just above the cupboard door, and he attached the gut to a bell by his bedside. By this means nobody could open that cupboard without ringing in his ears.

Jessie told Tom, Tom told Maria and Harriet; Harriet and Maria told Everybody; Somebody told Sir Charles. He was deeply mortified.

"You young idiot!" said he; "would nothing less than this serve your turn? must you go and lower me and yourself by giving just offence to my one enemy?—the man I hate and despise, and who is always on the watch to injure or affront me. Oh! who would be a father! There, pack up your things: you will go to school next morning at eight o'clock."

Mr. Reginald packed accordingly; but that did not occupy long; so he sallied forth, and, taking for granted that it was Richard Bassett who had been so mean as to tell, he purchased some paint and brushes and a rope, and languished until midnight.

But when that magic hour came he was brisk as a bee; let himself down from his veranda, and stole to Richard Bassett's front door, and inscribed thereon, in large and glaring letters, —

"JERRY SNEAK, Esq.,
Tell-Tale Tit."

He then returned home much calmed and comforted, climbed up his rope and into his room, and there slept sweetly, as one who had discharged his duty to his neighbor and society in general.

In the morning, however, he was very active, hurried the grooms, and was off before the appointed time.

Sir Charles came down to breakfast, and lo! young Hopeful gone, without the awkward ceremony of leave-taking.

Sir Charles found, as usual, many delicacies on his table, and amongst them one rarer to him than ortolan, pin-tail, or wild turkey (in which last my soul delights); for he found a letter from Richard Bassett, Esq.

"SIR, — Last night we caught your successor that is to be at my dining-room window, prying

into my private affairs. Having the honor of our family at heart, I was about to administer a little wholesome correction, when he reminded me he had been instrumental in tracking Miss Bassett, and thereby rescuing her: upon this I was, naturally, mollified, and sent him about his business, hoping to have seen the last of him at Highmore.

"This morning my door is covered with opprobrious epithets, and, as Mr. Bassett bought paint and brushes at the shop yesterday afternoon, it is doubtless to him I am indebted for them.

"I make no comments; I simply record the facts, and put them down to your credit, and your son's.

"Your obedient Servant,

"RICHARD BASSETT."

Lady Bassett did not come down to breakfast that morning; so Sir Charles digested this dish in solitude.

He was furious with Reginald; but, as Richard Bassett's remonstrance was intended to insult him, he wrote back as follows:

"SIR, — I am deeply grieved that a son of mine should descend to look in at your windows, or to write anything whatever upon your door; and I will take care it shall never recur.

"Yours obediently,

"CHARLES DYKE BASSETT."

This little correspondence was salutary; it fanned the coals of hatred between the cousins.

Reckless Reginald soon found he had caught a tartar in his new master.

That gentleman punished him severely for every breach of discipline. The study was a cool dark room, with one window looking north, and that window barred. Here he locked up the erratic youth for hours at a time, upon the slightest escapade.

Reginald wrote a honeyed letter to Sir Charles, bewailing his lot, and praying to be removed.

Sir Charles replied sternly, and sent him a copy of Mr. Richard Bassett's letter. He wrote to Mr. Beecher at the same time, expressing his full approval.

Thus disciplined, the boy began to change, he became moody, sullen, silent, and even sleepy, — this was the less wonderful, that he generally escaped at night to a gypsy camp, and courted a gypsy girl, who was nearly as handsome as himself, besides being older, and far more knowing.

His tongue went like a mill, and the whole tribe soon knew all about him, and his parents.

One morning the servants got up supernaturally early, to wash. Mr. Reginald was detected stealing back to his roost, and reported to the master.

Mr. Beecher had him up directly, locked him into the study alone; put the other students into the drawing-room; and erected bars to his bedroom window.

A few days of this, and he pined like a bird in a cage.

A few more, and his gypsy girl came fortune-telling to the servants, and wormed out the truth.

Then she came at night under his window, and made him a signal. He told her his hard case, and told her also a resolution he had come to. She informed the tribe. The tribe consulted. A keen saw was flung up to him; in two nights he was through the bars; the third he was free, and joined his sable friends.

They struck their tents, and decamped with horses, asses, tents, and baggage, and were many miles away by daybreak, without troubling turnpikes.

The boy left not a line behind him, and Mr. Beecher half hoped he might come back; still he sent to the nearest station, and telegraphed to Huntercombe.

Sir Charles mounted a fleet horse, and rode off at once into Cambridgeshire. He set inquiries on foot, and learned that the boy had been seen consorting with a tribe of gypsies. He heard, also, that these were rather high gypsies, many of them foreigners; and that they dealt in horses, and had a farrier; and that one or two of the girls were handsome, and also singers.

Sir Charles telegraphed for detectives from London: wrote to the Mayors of towns; advertised, with full description and large reward, and brought such pressure to bear upon the Egyptians, that the band began to fear: they consulted, and took measures for their own security: none too soon, for, they being encamped on Grey's Common in Oxfordshire, Sir Charles and the rural police rode into the camp, and demanded young Hopeful.

They were equal to the occasion: at first they knew nothing of the matter, and, with injured innocence, invited a full inspection.

The invitation was accepted.

Then, all of a sudden, one of the women affected to be struck with an idea. "It is the young gentleman who wanted to join us in Cambridgeshire."

Then all their throats opened at once. "Yes, gentleman, there was a lovely young gentleman wanted to come with us; but we would n't have him. What could we do with him?"

Sir Charles left them under surveillance, and continued his researches, telegraphing Lady Bassett twice every day.

A dark stranger came into Huntercombe village, no longer young, but still a striking figure: had once, no doubt, been superlatively handsome. Even now, his long hair was black, and his eye could glitter: but his life had impregnated his noble features with hardness and meanness; his large

black eye was restless, keen, and servile: an excellent figure for a painter though; born in Spain he was not afraid of color, had a red cap on his snaky black hair, and a striped waistcoat.

He inquired for Mr. Meyrick's farm.

He soon found his way thither, and asked for Mrs. Meyrick.

The female servant who opened the door ran her eye up and down him, and said, brusquely, "What do you want with her, my man? because she is busy."

"O, she will see me, Miss."

Softened by the "Miss," the girl laughed, and said, "What makes you think that, my man?"

"Give her this, Miss," said the gypsy, "and she will come to me."

He held her out a dirty crumpled piece of paper.

Sally, whose hands were wet from the tub, whipped her hand under the corner of her checkered apron, and so took the note with a finger and thumb operating through the linen. By this means she avoided two evils,—her fingers did not wet the letter, and the letter did not dirty her fingers.

She took it into the kitchen to her mistress, whose arms were deep in a wash-tub.

Mrs. Meyrick had played the fine lady at first starting, and for six months would not put her hand to anything. But those twin cajolers of the female heart, Dignity and Laziness, made her so utterly wretched, that she returned to her old habits of work, only she combined with it the sweets of domination.

Sally came in, and said, "It's an old gypsy, which he have brought you this."

Mrs. Meyrick instantly wiped the soap-suds from her brown but shapely arms, and, whipping a wet hand under her apron, took the note just as Sally had. It contained these words only:—

"NURSE, — *The old Romanes will tell you all about me.* REGINALD."

She had no sooner read it than she took her sleeves down, and whipped her shawl off a peg, and put it on, and took off her apron, — and all for an old gypsy. No stranger must take her for anything but a lady.

Thus embellished in a turn of the hand, she went hastily to the door.

She and the gypsy both started at sight of each other, and Mrs. Meyrick screamed.

"Why, what brings you here, old man?" said she, panting. The gypsy answered with oily sweetness, "The little gentleman sent me, my dear. Why, you look like a queen."

"Hush!" said Mrs. Meyrick. "Come in here."

She made the old gypsy sit down, and she sat close to him.

"Speak low, Daddy," said she, "and tell me all about my boy, my beautiful boy."

The old gypsy told Mrs. Meyrick the wrongs of Reginald that had driven him to this; and she fell to crying and lamenting, and inveighing against all concerned, — Schoolmaster, Sir Charles, Lady Bassett, and the gypsies. Them, the old man defended, and assured her the young gentleman was in good hands, and would be made a little King of, all the more, that Keturah had told them there was gypsy blood in him.

Mrs. Meyrick treated this with loud scorn; and then returned to her grief.

When she had indulged that grief for a long time, she felt a natural desire to quarrel with somebody, and she actually put on her bonnet, and was going to the Hall to give Lady Bassett a bit of her mind, for she said that lady had never shown the feelings of a woman for the lamb.

But she thought better of it, and postponed the visit. "I shall be sure to say something I shall be sorry for after," said she: so she sat down again, and returned to her grief.

Nor could she ever shake it off as thoroughly as she had done any other trouble in her life.

Months after this, she said to Sally, with a burst of tears, "I never nursed but one, and I shall never nurse another: and now he is across the seas."

She kept the old gypsy at the farm; or, to speak more correctly, she made the farm his head-quarters. She assigned him the only bedroom he would accept, viz. a cattle-shed, open on one side. She used often to have him into her room, when she was alone: she gave him some of her husband's clothes, and made him wear a decent hat: by these means she effaced, in some degree, his nationality, and then she compelled her servants to call him "The foreign Gent."

The foreign Gent was very apt to disappear in fine weather, but rain soon drove him back to her fireside, and hunger to her flesh-pots.

On the very day the foreign Gent came to Meyrick's farm, Lady Bassett had a letter by post from Reginald.

"DEAR MAMMA, — *I am gone with the gypsies, across the water. I am sorry to leave you. You are the right sort: but they tormented me so, with their books, and their dark rooms. It is very unfortunate to be a boy. When I am a man, I shall be too old to be tormented, and then I will come back.*

Your dutiful Son,
"REGINALD."

Lady Bassett telegraphed Sir Charles, and he returned to Huntercombe, looking old, sad, and worn.

Lady Bassett set herself to comfort and cheer him, and this was her gentle office for many a long month.

She was the more fit for it, that her own health and spirits revived the moment Reginald left the country with his friends the gypsies; the color crept back to her cheek, her spirits revived, and she looked as handsome, and almost as young, as when she married. She tasted tranquillity. Year after year went by, without any news of Reginald, and the hope grew that he would never cross her threshold again, and Compton be Sir Charles's heir, without any more trouble.

CHAPTER THE THIRTY-FOURTH.

Our story now makes a bold skip. Compton Bassett was fourteen years old, a youth highly cultivated in mind, and trained in body, but not very tall, and rather effeminate looking, because he was so fair and his skin so white.

For all that, he was one of the bowlers in the Woolcombe eleven, whose cricket-ground was the very meadow in which he had erst gathered cowlslips with Ruperta Bassett; and he had a canoe, which he carried to adjacent streams, however narrow, and paddled it with singular skill and vigor. A neighboring miller, suffering under drought, was heard to say "There ain't water enough to float a duck; nought can swim but the dabchicks and Muster Bassett."

He was also a pedestrian, and got his father to take long walks with him, and leave the horses to eat their oats in peace.

In these walks young master botanized and geologized his own father, and Sir Charles gave him a little politics, history, and English poetry, in return. He had a tutor fresh from Oxford for the classics.

One day, returning with his father from a walk, they met a young lady walking towards them from the village: she was tall, and a superb brunette.

Now it was rather a rare thing to see a lady walking through that village, so both Sir Charles and his son looked keenly at her, as she came towards them.

Compton turned crimson, and raised his hat to her rather awkwardly.

Sir Charles, who did not know the lady from Eve, saluted her nevertheless, and with infinite grace; for Sir Charles, in his youth, had lived with some of the *élite* of French society, and those gentlemen bow to the person whom their companion bows to. Sir Charles had imported this excellent trait of politeness, and always practised it,

though not the custom in England, the more the pity.

As soon as the young lady had passed and was out of hearing, Sir Charles said to Compton, "Who is that lovely girl? Why, how the boy is blushing!"

"O papa!"

"Well, what is the matter?"

"Don't you see? It is herself, come back from school."

"I have no doubt it is herself, and not her sister, but who is herself?"

"Rupert Bassett."

"Richard Bassett's daughter! impossible. That young lady looks seventeen or eighteen years of age."

"Yes, but it is Rupert. There's nobody like her. — Papa."

"Well?"

"I suppose I may speak to her now."

"What for?"

"She is so beautiful."

"That she really is. And therefore I advise you to have nothing to say to her. You are not children now, you know. Were you to renew that intimacy, you might be tempted to fall in love with her. I don't say you would be so mad, for you are a sensible boy: but still, after that little business in the wood —"

"But suppose I did fall in love with her?"

"Then that would be a great misfortune. Don't you know that her father is my enemy? If you were to make any advances to that young lady, he would seize the opportunity to affront you, and me through you."

This silenced Compton, for he was an obedient youth.

But in the evening he got to his mother and coaxed her to take his part.

Now Lady Bassett felt the truth of all her husband had said; but she had a positive wish the young people should be on friendly terms at all events: she wanted the family feud to die with the generation it had afflicted. She promised, therefore, to speak to Sir Charles; and so great was her influence that she actually obtained terms for Compton: he might speak to Miss Bassett, if he would realize the whole situation, and be very discreet, and not revive that absurd familiarity into which their childhood had been betrayed.

She communicated this to him, and warned him at the same time that even this concession had been granted somewhat reluctantly, and in consideration of his invariable good conduct; it would be immediately withdrawn upon the slightest indiscretion.

"O, I will be discretion itself," said Compton; but the warmth with which he kissed his mother gave her some doubts. However, she was prepared to risk something. She had her own views in this matter.

When he had got this limited permission, Master Compton was not much nearer the mark; for he was not to call on the young lady, and she did not often walk in the village.

But he often thought of her, her loving, sprightly ways seven years ago, and the blaze of beauty with which she had returned.

At last, one Sunday afternoon, she came to church alone. When the congregation dispersed, he followed her, and came up with her, but his heart beat violently.

"Miss Bassett!" said he, timidly.

She stopped and turned her eyes on him: he blushed up to the temples. She blushed too, but not quite so much.

"I am afraid you don't remember me," said the boy, sadly.

"Yes I do, sir," said Rupert, shyly.

"How you are grown!"

"Yes, sir."

"You are taller than I am; and more beautiful than ever."

No answer, but a blush.

"You are not angry with me for speaking to you?"

"No, sir."

"I would n't offend you."

"I am not offended. Only —"

"O Miss Bassett, of course I know you will never be — we shall never be — like we used."

A very deep blush, and dead silence.

"You are a grown-up young lady, and I am only a boy still, somehow. But it *would* have been hard if I might not even speak to you. Would it not?"

"Yes," said the young lady, but after some hesitation, and only in a whisper.

"I wonder where you walk to. I have never seen you out but once."

No reply to this little feeler.

Then, at last, Compton was discouraged, partly by her beauty and size, partly by her taciturnity.

He was silent in return, and so, in a state of mutual constraint, they reached the gate Highmore.

"Good by," said Compton, reluctantly.

"Good by."

"Won't you shake hands?"

She blushed, and put out her hand half-way. He took it and shook it, and so they parted.

Compton said to his mother disconsolately, "Mamma, it is all over. I have seen her, and spoken to her: but she has gone off dreadfully."

"Why, what is the matter?"

"She is all changed. She is so stupid and dignified got to be. She has not a word to say to a fellow."

"Perhaps she is more reserved: that is natural. She is a young lady now."

"Then it is a great pity she did not stay as she was. O, the bright little darling! Who'd think she could ever turn into a great, stupid, dignified thing? She is as tall as you, mamma."

"Indeed! She has made use of her time. Well, dear, don't take *too much* notice of her, and then you will find she will not be nearly so shy."

"Too much notice! I shall never speak to her again — perhaps."

"I would not be violent, one way or the other. Why not treat her like any other acquaintance?"

Next Sunday afternoon she came to church alone.

In spite of his resolution, Mr. Compton tried her a second time. Horror! she was all monosyllables and blushes again.

Compton began to find it too uphill. At last, when they reached Highmore gate, he lost his patience, and said, "I see how it is. I have lost my sweet playmate forever. Good by, Ruperta; I won't trouble you any more." And he held out his hand to the young lady for a final farewell.

Ruperta whipped both her hands behind her back like a school-girl, and then, recovering her dignity, cast one swift glance of gentle reproach, then suddenly assuming vast stateliness, marched into Highmore like the mother of a family. These three changes of manner she effected all in less than two seconds.

Poor Compton went away sorely puzzled by this female kaleidoscope, but not a little alarmed and concerned at having mortally offended so much feminine dignity.

After that he did not venture to accost her for some time, but he cast a few sheep's-eyes at her in church.

Now Ruperta had told her mother all; and her mother had not forbidden her to speak to Compton, but had insisted on reserve and discretion.

She now told her mother she thought he would not speak to her any more, she had snubbed him so.

"Dear me!" said Mrs. Bassett, "why did you do that? Can you not be polite and nothing more?"

"No, mamma."

"Why not? He is very amiable. Everybody says so."

"He is. But I keep remembering what a forward girl I was, and I am afraid he has not forgotten it either, and that makes me hate the poor little fellow; no, not hate him; but keep him off. I dare say he thinks me a cross ill-tempered thing; and I am very unkind to him: but I can't help it."

"Never mind," said Mrs. Bassett; "that is much better than to be too forward. Papa would never forgive that."

By and by there was a cricket-match in

the farmer's meadow, Highcombe and Huntercombe eleven against the town of Staveleigh. All clubs liked to play at Huntercombe, because Sir Charles found the tents and the dinner, and the young farmers drank his champagne to their hearts' content.

Ruperta took her maid and went to see the match. They found it going against Huntercombe. The score as follows:

Staveleigh. First innings, a hundred and forty-eight runs.

Huntercombe eighty-eight.

Staveleigh. Second innings, sixty runs, and only one wicket down; and Johnson and Wright, two of their best men, well in, and masters of the bowling.

This being communicated to Ruperta, she became excited, and her soul in the game.

The batters went on knocking the balls about, and scored thirteen more, before the young lady's eyes.

"O dear!" said she, "what is that boy about? Why doesn't he bowl? They pretend he is a capital bowler."

At this time, Compton was standing long-field on, only farther from the wicket than usual.

Johnson at the wicket bowled to, being a hard but not very scientific hitter, lifted a half volley ball right over the bowler's head, a hit for four, but a sky-scraper. Compton started the moment he hit, and, running with prodigious velocity, caught the ball descending, within a few yards of Ruperta; but, to get at it, he was obliged to throw himself forward into the air; he rolled upon the grass, but held the ball in sight all the while.

Mr. Johnson was out, and loud acclamations rent the sky.

Compton rose, and saw Ruperta clapping her hands close by.

She left off, and blushed, directly he saw her. He blushed too, and touched his cap to her, with an air half manly, half sheepish; but did not speak to her.

This was the last ball of the over, and, as the ball was now to be delivered from the other wicket, Compton took the place of long-leg.

The third ball was overpitched to leg, and Wright, who, like most country players, hit freely to leg, turned half, and caught this ball exactly right, and sent it whizzing for six.

But the very force of the stroke was fatal to him; the ball went at first bound right into Compton's hands, who instantly flung it back, like a catapult, at Wright's wicket.

Wright, having hit for six, and being unable to see what had become of the ball, started to run, as a matter of course.

But the other batsman, seeing the ball go right into long-legs hands like a bullet, cried "Back!"

Wright tugged, and would have got back to his wicket, if the ball had required handling by the wicket-keeper; but, by a mixture of skill with luck, it came right at the wicket. Seeing which, the wicket-keeper very judiciously let it alone, and it carried off the bails just half a second before Mr. Wright grounded his bat.

"How's that, umpire?" cried the wicket-keeper.

"Out!" said the Staveleigh umpire, who judged at that end.

Up went the ball into the air, amidst great excitement of the natives.

Ruperta, carried away by the general enthusiasm, nodded all sparkling to Compton, and that made his heart beat, and his soul aspire. So next over he claimed his rights, and took the ball. Luck still befriended him: he bowled four wickets in twelve overs; the wicket-keeper stumped a fifth: the rest were "the tail," and disposed of for a few runs, and the total was no more than Huntercombe's first innings.

Our hero then took the bat, and made forty-seven runs before he was disposed of, five wickets down for a hundred and ten runs. The match was not won yet, nor sure to be; but the situation was reversed.

On going out, he was loudly applauded; and Ruperta naturally felt proud of her admirer.

Being now free, he came to her irresolutely with some iced champagne.

Ruperta declined, with thanks; but he looked so imploringly that she sipped a little, and said, warmly, "I hope we shall win: and, if we do, I know whom we shall have to thank."

"And so do I: you, Miss Bassett."

"Me? Why, what have I done in the matter?"

"You brought us luck, for one thing. You put us on our mettle. Staveleigh shall never beat me, with you looking on."

Ruperta blushed a little, for the boy's eyes beamed with fire.

"If I believed that," said she, "I should hire myself out at the next match, and charge twelve pair of gloves."

"You may believe it, then; ask anybody whether our luck did not change the moment you came."

"Then I am afraid it will go now, for I am going."

"You will lose us the match if you do," said Compton.

"I can't help it: now *you* are out, it is rather insipid. There, you see I can pay compliments as well as you."

Then she made a graceful inclination and moved away.

Compton felt his heart ache at parting. He took a thought and ran quickly to a certain part of the field.

Ruperta and her attendant walked very slowly homeward.

Compton caught them just at their own gate. "Cousin!" said he, imploringly, and held her out a nosegay of cowslips only.

At that the memories rushed back on her, and the girl seemed literally to melt. She gave him one look full of womanly sensibility and winning tenderness, and said, softly, "Thank you, cousin."

Compton went away on wings: the ice was broken.

But the next time he met her it had frozen again apparently: to be sure she was alone; and young ladies will be bolder when they have another person of their own sex with them.

Mr. Angelo called on Sir Charles Bassett to complain of a serious grievance.

Mr. Angelo had become zealous and eloquent, but what are eloquence and zeal against sex? A handsome woman had preached for ten minutes upon a little mound outside the village, and had announced she should say a few parting words next Sunday evening at six o'clock.

Mr. Angelo complained of this to Lady Bassett.

Lady Bassett referred him to Sir Charles.

Mr. Angelo asked that magistrate to enforce the law against conventicles.

Sir Charles said he thought the Act did not apply.

"Well, but," said Angelo, "it is on your ground she is going to preach."

"I am the proprietor, but the tenant is the owner in law. He could *warn me* off his ground. I have no power."

"I fear you have no inclination," said Angelo, nettled.

"Not much, to tell the truth," replied Sir Charles, coolly. "Does it matter so very much *who* sows the good seed, or whether it is flung abroad from a pulpit or a grassy knoll?"

"That is begging the question, Sir Charles. Why assume that it is good seed? it is more likely to be tares than wheat in this case."

"And is not that begging the question? Well, I will make it my business to know: and if she preaches sedition, or heresy, or bad morals, I will strain my power a little to silence her. More than that I really cannot promise you. The day is gone by for intolerance."

"Intolerance is a bad thing; but the absence of all conviction is worse, and that is what we are coming to."

"Not quite that: but the nation has tasted liberty; and now every man assumes to do what is right in his own eyes."

"That means what is wrong in his neighbor's."

Sir Charles thought this neat, and laughed good-humoredly: he asked the rector to dine on Sunday at half past seven. "I shall know more about it by that time," said he.

They dined early on Sunday, at Highmore, and Ruperta took her maid for a walk in the afternoon and came back in time to hear the female preacher.

Half the village was there already, and presently the Preacher walked to her station.

To Ruperta's surprise, she was a lady, richly dressed, tall, and handsome, but with features rather too commanding. She had a glove on her left hand, and a little Bible in her right hand, which was large, but white, and finely formed.

She delivered a short prayer, and opened her text:—

"Walk honestly; not in strife and envying."

Just as the text was given out, Ruperta's maid pinched her, and the young lady, looking up, saw her father coming to see what was the matter. Maid was for hiding, but Ruperta made a wry face, blushed, and stood her ground. "How can he scold me, when he comes himself?" she whispered.

During the sermon, of which, short as it was, I can only afford to give the outline, in crept Compton Bassett, and got within three or four of Ruperta.

Finally Sir Charles Bassett came up, in accordance with his promise to Angelo.

The perfect preacher deals in generalities, but strikes them home with a few personalities.

Most clerical preachers deal only in generalities, and that is ineffective, especially to uncultivated minds.

Mrs. Marsh, as might be expected from her sex, went a little too much the other way.

After a few sensible words, pointing out the misery in houses, and the harm done to the soul, by a quarrelsome spirit, she lamented there was too much of it in Huntercombe: with this opening she went into personalities: reminded them of the fight between two farm servants last week, one of whom was laid up at that moment in consequence. "And," said she, "even when it does not come to fighting, it poisons your lives, and offends your Redeemer."

Then she went into the causes, and she said Drunkenness and Detraction were the chief causes of strife and contention.

She dealt briefly but dramatically with Drunkenness, and then lashed Detraction, as follows:

"Every class has its vices, and Detraction is the vice of the poor. You are ever so much vainer than your betters: you are eaten up with vanity, and never give your neighbor a good word. I have been in

thirty houses, and in not one of those houses has any poor man or poor woman spoken one honest word in praise of a neighbor. So do not flatter yourselves that this is a Christian village: for it is not. The only excuse to be made for you, and I fear it is not one that God will accept on his judgment-day, is that your betters set you a bad example instead of a good one. The two principal people in this village are kinsfolk, yet enemies, and have been enemies for twenty years. That's a nice example for two Christian gentlemen to set to poor people, who, they may be sure, will copy their sins, if they copy nothing else.

"These gentlemen go to church regularly, and believe in the Bible, and yet they defy both church and Bible.

"Now I should like to ask those gentlemen a question. How do they mean to manage in heaven? When the Baronet comes to that happy place, where all is love, will the Squire walk out? Or do they think to quarrel there, and so get turned out, both of them? I don't wonder at your smiling; but it is a serious consideration for all that. The soul of man is immortal: and what is the soul? it is not a substantial thing, like the body; it is a bundle of thoughts and feelings: the thoughts we die with in this world, we shall wake up with them in the next. Yet here are two Christians loading their immortal souls with immortal hate. What a waste of feeling, if it must all be flung off together with the body, lest it drag the souls of both down to bottomless perdition.

"And what do they gain in this world?—irritation, ill-health, and misery. It is a fact that no man ever reached a great old age, who hated his neighbor; still less a good old age; for, if men would look honestly into their own hearts, they would own that to hate is to be miserable.

"I believe no men commit a sin for many years, without some special warnings; and to neglect these, is one sin more added to their account. Such a warning, or rather, I should say, such a pleading of Divine love, those two gentlemen have had. Do you remember, about eight years ago, two children were lost on one day, out of different houses in this village?" (A murmur from the crowd.)

"Perhaps some of you here present were instrumental, under God, in finding that pretty pair." (A louder murmur.)

"O, don't be afraid to answer me. Preaching is only a way of speaking; and I'm only a woman that is speaking to you for your good. Tell me,—we are not in church, tied up by strait-laced rules to keep men and women from getting within arm's-length of one another's souls,—tell me, who saw those two lost children?"

"I, I, I, I, I," roared several voices in reply.

"Is it true, as a good woman tells me, that the innocent darlings had each an arm round the other's neck?"

"Ay."

"And little coronets of flowers, to match their hair? (That was the girl's doing.)"

"Ay."

"And the little boy had played the man, and taken off his tippet to put round the little lady?"

"Ay!" with a burst of enthusiasm from the assembled rustics.

"I think I see them myself; and the torches lighting up the dewy leaves overhead, and that Divine picture of innocent love. Well, which was the prettier sight, and the fittest for heaven,—the hatred of the parents, or the affection of the children?"

"And now mark what a weapon hatred is, in the Devil's hands. There are only two people in this parish on whom that sight was wasted: and those two, being gentlemen, and men of education, would have been more affected by it than humble folk, if Hell had not been in their hearts; for Hate comes from Hell, and takes men down to the place it comes from.

"Do you then shun, in that one thing, the example of your betters: and I hope those children will shun it too. A father is to be treated with great veneration, but above all is our Heavenly Father and his law, and that law, what is it? — what has it been this eighteen hundred years and more? — Why, Love.

"Would you be happy in this world, and fit your souls to dwell hereafter even in the meanest of the many mansions prepared above, you *must*, above all things, be charitable. You must not run your neighbor down behind his back, — or God will hate you: you must not wound him to his face, — or God will hate you. You must overlook a fault or two, and see a man's bright side, and then God will love you. If you won't do that much for your neighbor, why, in Heaven's name, should God overlook a multitude of sins in you?

"Nothing goes to heaven surer than Charity, and nothing is so fit to sit in heaven. St. Paul had many things to be proud of, and to praise in himself, — things that the world is more apt to admire than Christian charity, the sweetest, but humblest of all the Christian graces: St. Paul I say was a bulwark of learning, an anchor of faith, a rock of constancy, a thunderbolt of zeal: yet see how he bestows the palm.

"Knowledge puffeth up: but charity edifieth. Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of pro-

phesy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing. Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. Charity never faileth: but prophecies — they shall fail; tongues — they shall cease; knowledge — it shall vanish away. And now abideth Faith, Hope, and Charity, these three, but the greatest of these is charity."

The fair orator delivered these words with such fire, such feeling, such trumpet-toned and heartfelt eloquence, that for the first time those immortal words sounded in these village ears true oracles of God.

Then, without pause, she went on. "So let us lift our hearts in earnest prayer to God that, in this world of thorns, and tempers, and trials, and troubles, and cares, he will give us the best cure for all, — the great sweetener of this mortal life, — the sure forerunner of Heaven, — his most excellent gift of charity." Then, in one generous burst, she prayed for love divine, and there was many a sigh, and many a tear, and, at the close, an "Amen!" such as, alas! we shall never, I fear, hear burst from a hundred bosoms where men repeat beautiful but stale words, and call it prayer.

The preacher retired, but the people still lingered spell-bound, and then arose that buzz, which shows that the words have gone home.

As for Richard Bassett, he had turned on his heel, indignant, as soon as the preacher's admonitions came his way.

Sir Charles Bassett stood his ground rather longer, being steeled by the conviction that the quarrel was none of his seeking. Moreover, he was not aware what a good friend this woman had been to him, nor what a good wife she had been to Marsh this seventeen years. His mind, therefore, made a clear leap from the Rhoda Somerset, the vixen of Hyde Park and Mayfair, to this preacher, and he could not help smiling; than which a worse frame for receiving unpalatable truths can hardly be conceived. And so the elders were obdurate. But Compton and Ruperta had no armor of old age, egotism, or prejudice to turn the darts of honest eloquence. They listened, as to the voice of an angel; they gazed, as on the face of an angel; and, when those silvery accents ceased, they

turned towards each other, and came towards each other, with the sweet enthusiasm that became their years. "O Cousin Ruperta!" quavered Compton. "O Cousin Compton!" cried Ruperta, the tears trickling down her lovely cheeks.

They could not say any more for ever so long.

Ruperta spoke first. She gave a final gulp, and said, "I will go and speak to her, and thank her."

"O Miss Ruperta, we shall be too late for tea," suggested the maid.

"Tea!" said Ruperta. "Our souls are before our Tea! I must speak to her, or else my heart will choke me, and kill me. I will go — and so will Compton."

"O yes!" said Compton.

And they hurried after the preacher.

They came up with her, flushed and panting; and now it was Compton's turn to be shy; the lady was so tall, and stately too.

But Ruperta was not much afraid of anything in petticoats. "O madam," said she, "if you please, may we speak to you?"

Mrs. Marsh turned round, and her somewhat aquiline features softened instantly at the two specimens of beauty and innocence that had run after her.

"Certainly, my young friends"; and she smiled maternally on them. She had children of her own.

"Who do you think we are? We are the two naughty children you preached about so beautifully."

"What! *you* the Babes in the wood?"

"Yes, madam. It was a long, long while ago, and we are fifteen now; are we not, Cousin Compton?"

"Yes, madam."

"And we are both so unhappy at our parents' quarrelling. At least I am."

"And so am I."

"And we came to thank you. Did n't we, Compton?"

"Yes, Ruperta."

"And to ask your advice. How are we to make our parents be friends? Old people will not be advised by young ones. They look down on us so; it is dreadful."

"My dear young lady," said Mrs. Marsh, "I will try and answer you: but let me sit down a minute; for, after preaching, I am apt to feel a little exhausted. Now, sit beside me, and give me each a hand, if you please."

"Well, my dears, I have been teaching you a lesson; and now you teach me one, and that is, how much easier it is to preach reconciliation and charity, than it is to practise it under certain circumstances. However, my advice to you is first to pray to God for wisdom in this thing, and then to watch every opportunity. Dissuade your

parents from every unkind act: don't be afraid to speak — with the word of God at your back. I know that you have no easy task before you. Sir Charles Bassett and Mr. Bassett were both among my hearers, and both turned their backs on me, and went away unsoftened; they would not give me a chance; would not hear me to an end, and I am not a wordy preacher neither."

Here an interruption occurred. Ruperta, so shy and cold with Compton, flung her arms round Mrs. Marsh's neck, with the tears in her eyes, and kissed her eagerly.

"Yes, my dear," said Mrs. Marsh, after kissing her in turn, "I was a little mortified. But that was very weak and foolish. I am sorry, for their own sakes, they would not stay; it was the word of God: but they saw only the unworthy instrument. Well, then, my dears, you *have* a hard task; but you must work upon your mothers, and win them to Charity."

"Ah! that will be easy enough. My mother has never approved this unhappy quarrel."

"No more has mine."

"Is it so? Then you must try and get the two ladies to speak to each other. But something tells me that a way will be opened. Have patience. Have Faith; and do not mind a check or two: but persevere, remembering that 'blessed are the peacemakers.'"

She then rose, and they took leave of her.

"Give me a kiss, children," said she. "You have done me a world of good. My own heart often flags on the road, and you have warmed and comforted it. God bless you!"

And so they parted.

Compton and Ruperta walked homewards. Ruperta was very thoughtful, and Compton could only get monosyllables out of her. This discouraged and at last vexed him.

"What have I done," said he, "that you will speak to anybody but me?"

"Don't be cross, child," said she; "but answer me a question. Did you put your tippet round me in that wood?"

"I suppose so."

"O, then you don't remember doing it, eh?"

"No; that I don't."

"Then what makes you think you did?"

"Because they say so. Because I must have been such an awful cad if I didn't. And I was always much fonder of you than you were of me. My tippet! I'd give my head sooner than any harm should come to you. Ruperta!"

Ruperta made no reply, but, being now at Highmore, she put out her hand to him, and turned her head away. He kissed her hand devotedly, and so they parted.

Compton told Lady Bassett all that had happened, and Ruperta told Mrs. Bassett.

Those ladies readily promised to be on the side of peace, but they feared it could only be the work of time, and said so.

By and by Compton got impatient, and told Ruperta he had thought of a way to compel their fathers to be friends. "I am afraid you won't like the idea, at first," said he; "but the more you think of it, the more you will see it is the surest way of all."

"Well, but what is it?"

"You must let me marry you."

Ruperta stared, and began to blush crimson.

"Will you, cousin?"

"Of course not, child. The idea!"

"O Ruperta," cried the boy, in dismay, "surely you don't mean to marry anybody else but me!"

"Would that make you very unhappy, then?"

"You know it would; wretched for my life."

"I should not like to do that. But I disapprove of early marriages. I mean to wait till I'm nineteen; and that is three years nearly."

"It is a fearful time: but, if you will promise not to marry anybody else, I suppose I shall live through it."

Ruperta, though she made light of Compton's offer, was very proud of it (it was her first). She told her mother directly.

Mrs. Bassett sighed, and said that was too blessed a thing ever to happen.

"Why not?" said Ruperta.

"How could it," said Mrs. Bassett, "with everybody against it but poor little me?"

"Compton assures me that Lady Bassett wishes it."

"Indeed! But Sir Charles and papa, Ruperta?"

"O, Compton must talk Sir Charles over, and I will persuade papa. I'll begin this evening, when he comes home from London."

Accordingly, as he was sitting alone in the dining-room, sipping his glass of port, Ruperta slipped away from her mother's side, and found him.

His face brightened at the sight of her; for he was extremely fond and proud of this girl, for whom he would not have the bells rung when she was born.

She came and hung round his neck a little, and kissed him, and said, softly, "Dear papa, I have something to tell you. I have had a proposal."

Richard Bassett stared.

"What, of marriage?"

Ruperta nodded archly.

"To a child like you? Scandalous! No, for after all you look nineteen or twenty.

And who is the highwayman that thinks to rob me of my precious girl?"

"Well, papa, whoever he is, he will have to wait three years, and so I told him. It is my cousin Compton."

"What!" cried Richard Bassett, so loudly, that the girl started back dismayed. "That little monkey have the impudence to offer marriage to my daughter? Surely, Ruperta, you have offered him no encouragement?"

"N—no."

"Your mother promised me nothing but common civility should pass between you and that young gentleman."

"She promised for me, but she could not promise for him: poor little fellow!"

"Marry a son of the man who has robbed and insulted your father?"

"O papa! is it so? Are you sure you did not begin?"

"If you can think that, it is useless to say more. I thought ill-fortune had done its worst; but no: blow upon blow, and wound upon wound. Don't spare me, child. Nobody else has; and why should you? Marry my enemy's son, his younger son, and break your father's heart."

At this, what could a sensitive girl of sixteen do but burst out crying, and promise, round her father's neck, never to marry any one whom he disliked.

When she had made this promise, her father fondled and petted her, and his tenderness consoled her, for she was not passionately in love with her cousin.

Yet she cried a good deal over the letter in which she communicated this to Compton.

He lay in wait for her; but she baffled him for three weeks.

After that she relaxed her vigilance, for she had no real wish to avoid him, and was curious to see whether she had cured him.

He met her; and his conduct took her by surprise. He was pale, and looked very unhappy.

He said, solemnly, "Were you jesting with me when you promised to marry no one but me?"

"No, Compton. But you know I could never marry you without papa's consent."

"Of course not; but, what I fear, he might wish you to marry somebody else."

"Then I should refuse. I will never break my word to you, cousin. I am not in love with you, you are too young for that,—but somehow I feel I could not make you unhappy. Can't you trust my word? You might. I come of the same people as you. Why do you look so pale?—we are very unhappy."

Then the tears began to steal down her cheeks; and Compton's soon followed.

Compton consulted his mother. She told

him, with a sigh, she was powerless. Sir Charles might yield to her, but she had no power to influence Mr. Bassett, at present. "The time may come," said she. She could not take a very serious view of this amour, except with regard to its pacific results. So Mr. Bassett's opposition chilled her in the matter.

While things were so, something occurred that drove all these minor things out of her distracted heart.

One summer evening, as she and Sir Charles and Compton sat at dinner, a servant came in to say there was a stranger at the door, and he called himself Bassett.

"What is he like?" said Lady Bassett, turning pale.

"He looks like a foreigner, my lady. He says he is Mr. Bassett," said the man, with a scandalized air.

Sir Charles got up directly, and hurried to the hall door. Compton followed Lady Bassett to the door only, and looked.

Sure enough it was Reginald, full grown, and bold, as handsome as ever, and darker than ever.

In that moment his misconduct in running away never occurred either to Sir Charles or Compton; all was eager and tremulous welcome. The hall rang with joy. They almost carried him into the dining-room.

The first thing they saw was a train of violet-colored velvet, half hidden by the table.

Compton ran forward, with a cry of dismay.

It was Lady Bassett, in a dead swoon, her face as white as her neck and arms, and these as white and smooth as satin.

CHAPTER THE THIRTY-FIFTH.

LADY BASSETT was carried to her room, and did not reappear. She kept her own apartments, and her health declined so rapidly that Sir Charles sent for Dr. Willis. He prescribed for the body, but the disease lay in the mind. Martyr to an inward struggle, she pined visibly, and her beautiful eyes began to shine like stars, preternaturally large. She was in a frightful condition: she longed to tell the truth and end it all: but then she must lose her adored husband's respect, and perhaps his love; and she had not the courage. She saw no way out of it but to die and leave her confession: and, as she felt that the agony of her soul was killing her by degrees, she drew a sombre resignation from that.

She declined to see Reginald. She could not bear the sight of him.

Compton came to her many times a day,

with a face full of concern and even terror. But she would not talk to him of herself.

He brought her all the news he heard, having no other way to cheer her.

One day he told her there were robbers about. Two farm-houses had been robbed, a thing not known in these parts for many years.

Lady Bassett shuddered, but said nothing.

But by and by her beloved son came to her in distress with a grief of his own.

Rupert Bassett was now the beauty of the county, and it seems Mr. Rutland had danced with her at her first ball, and been violently smitten with her; he had called more than once at Highmore, and his attentions were directly encouraged by Mr. Bassett. Now Mr. Rutland was heir to a peerage, and also to considerable estates in the country.

Compton was sick at heart, and, being young, saw his life about to be blighted; so now he was pale and woebegone, and told her the sad news with such deep sighs and imploring tearful eyes, that all the mother rose in arms. "Ah!" said she, "they say to themselves that I am down, and cannot fight for my child; but I would fight for him on the edge of the grave. Let me think all by myself, dear. Come back to me in an hour. I shall do something. Your mother is a very cunning woman — for those she loves."

Compton kissed her gown, — a favorite action of his, for he worshipped her, — and went away.

The invalid laid her hollow cheek upon her wasted hand, and thought with all her might. By degrees her extraordinary brain developed a twofold plan of action; and she proceeded to execute the first part, being the least difficult, though even that was not easy, and brought a vivid blush to her wasted cheek.

She wrote to Mrs. Bassett.

"MADAM, — I am very ill, and life is uncertain. Something tells me you, like me, regret the unhappy feud between our houses. If this is so, it would be a consolation to me to take you by the hand, and exchange a few words, as we already have a few kind looks.

"Yours respectfully,

"BELLA BASSETT."

She showed this letter to Compton, and told him he might send a servant with it to Highmore at once.

"O mamma!" said he, "I never thought you would do that: how good you are! You could n't ask Rupert, could you? Just in a little postscript, you know."

Lady Bassett shook her head.

"That would not be wise, my dear. Let me hook that fish for you, not frighten her away."

Great was the astonishment at Highmore when a blazing footman knocked at the door and handed Jessie the letter with assumed nonchalance, then stalked away, concealing with professional art his own astonishment at what he had done.

It was no business of Jessie's to take letters into the drawing-room; she would have deposited any other letter on the hall table; but she brought this one in, and, standing at the door, exclaimed, "Here 's a letter fr' Huntercombe!"

Richard Bassett, Mrs. Bassett, and Ruperta, all turned upon her with one accord. "From where?"

"Fr' Huntercombe itself'. Et is na for you, nor for you, Missy. Et's for the mester-ress."

She marched proudly up to Mrs. Bassett, and laid the letter down on the table; then drew back a step or two, and, being Scotch, coolly waited to hear the contents. Richard Bassett, being English, told her she need not stay.

Mrs. Bassett cast a bewildered look at her husband and daughter, then opened the letter quietly; read it quietly; and, having read it, took out her handkerchief, and began to cry quietly.

Ruperta cried, "O mamma!" and, in a moment, had one long arm round her mother's neck; while the other hand seized the letter, and she read it aloud, cheek to cheek; but, before she got to an end, her mother's tears infected her, and she must whimper too.

Here are a couple of geese," said Richard Bassett. "Can 't you write a civil reply to a civil letter, without snivelling? I'll answer the letter for you."

"No!" said Mrs. Bassett.

Richard was amazed: Ruperta ditto.

The little woman had never dealt in "Noes," least of all to her husband: and besides this was such a plump "No." It came out of her mouth like a marble.

I think the sound surprised even herself a little, for she proceeded to justify it at once. "I have been a better wife than a Christian this many years. But there's a limit. And, Richard, I should never have married you, if you had told me we were to be at war all our lives with our next neighbor, that everybody respects. To live in the country, and not speak to our only neighbor, that is a life I never would have left my father's house for. Not that I complain: if you have been bitter to them, you have always been good and kind to me; and I hope I have done my best to deserve it; but, when a sick lady, and perhaps dying, holds out her hand to me, — write her one of your cold-blooded letters! That I won't. Reply? my reply will be just putting on my bonnet, and going to her this afternoon. It

is Passion-week too; and that's not a week to play the heathen. Poor lady! I've seen in her sweet eyes this many years that she would gladly be friends with me: and she never passed me close but she bowed to me in church or out, even when we were at daggers drawn. She is a lady, a real lady, every inch. But it is not that altogether. No, if a sick woman called me to her bedside this week, I'd go, whether she wrote from Huntercombe Hall, or the poorest house in the place; else how could I hope my Saviour would come to my bedside, at my last hour?"

This honest burst from a meek lady, who never talked nonsense to be sure, but seldom went into eloquence, staggered Richard Bassett, and enraptured Ruperta so, that she flung both arms round her mother's neck, and cried, "O mamma! I always thought you were the best woman in England, and now I know it."

"Well, well, well," said Richard, kindly enough: then to Ruperta, "Did I ever say she was not the best woman in England? So you need not set up your throats neck and neck at me, like two geese at a fox. Unfortunately, she is the simplest woman in England, as well as the best, and she is going to visit the cunningest. That Lady Bassett will turn your mother inside out in no time. I wish you would go with her; you are a shrewd girl."

"My daughter will not go till she is asked," said Mrs. Bassett, firmly.

"In that case," said Richard, dryly, "let us hope the Lord will protect you, since it is for love of him you go into a she-fox's den."

No reply was vouchsafed to this aspiration, the words being the words of faith, but the voice the voice of scepticism.

Mrs. Bassett put on her bonnet, and went to Huntercombe Hall.

After a very short delay she was ushered up stairs, to the room where Lady Bassett was lying on a sofa.

Lady Bassett heard her coming, and rose to receive her.

She made Mrs. Bassett a court courtesy so graceful and profound that it rather frightened the little woman. Seeing which, Lady Bassett changed her style, and came forward, extending both hands with admirable grace, and gentle amity, not overdone.

Mrs. Bassett gave her both hands, and they looked full at each other in silence, till the eyes of both ladies began to fill.

"You would have come — like this — years ago — at a word?" faltered Lady Bassett.

"Yes," gulped Mrs. Bassett.

Then there was another long pause.

"O Lady Bassett, what a life! It is a wonder it has not killed us both."

"It will kill one of us."

"Not if I can help it."

"God bless you for saying so. Dear madam, sit by me, and let me hold the hand I might have had years ago, if I had had the courage."

"Why should you take the blame?" said Mrs. Bassett. "We have both been good wives; too obedient, perhaps. But to have to choose between a husband's commands and God's law, that is a terrible thing for any poor woman."

"It is indeed."

Then there was another silence, and an awkward pause. Mrs. Bassett broke it, with some hesitation. "I hope, Lady Bassett, your present illness is not in any way—I hope you do not fear anything more from my husband?"

"O Mrs. Bassett! how can I help fearing it,—especially if we provoke him? Mr. Reginald Bassett has returned, and you know he once gave your husband cause for just resentment."

"Well, but he is older now, and has more sense. Even if he should, Ruperta and I must try and keep the peace."

"Ruperta! I wish I had asked you to bring her with you. But I feared to ask too much at once."

"I'll send her to you to-morrow, Lady Bassett."

"No, bring her."

"Then tell me your hour."

"Yes, and I will send somebody out of the way. I want you both to myself."

Whilst this conversation was going on at Huntercombe, Richard Bassett, being left alone with his daughter, proceeded to work with his usual skill upon her young mind.

He reminded her of Mr. Rutland's prospects, and said he hoped to see her a countess, and the loveliest jewel of the Peerage.

He then told her Mr. Rutland was coming to stay a day or two next week, and requested her to receive him graciously.

She promised that at once.

"That," said he, "will be a much better match for you than the younger son of Sir Charles Bassett. However, my girl is too proud to go into a family where she is not welcome."

"Much too proud for that," said Ruperta.

He left her smarting under that suggestion.

Whilst he was smoking his cigar in the garden, Mrs. Bassett came home; she was in raptures with Lady Bassett, and told her daughter all that had passed; and, in conclusion, that she had promised Lady Bassett to take her to Huntercombe to-morrow.

"Me, dear!" cried Ruperta: "why, what can she want of me?"

"All I know is, her ladyship wishes very

much to see you. In my opinion you will be very welcome to poor Lady Bassett."

"Is she very ill?"

Mrs. Bassett shook her head. "She is much changed. She says she should be better if we were all at peace: but I don't know."

"O mamma, I wish it was to-morrow."

They went to Huntercombe next day; and, ill as she was, Lady Bassett received them charmingly. She was startled by Ruperta's beauty and womanly appearance, but too well bred to show it, or say it all in a moment.

She spoke to the mother first; but presently took occasion to turn to the daughter, and to say, "May I hope, Miss Bassett, that you are on the side of peace, like your dear mother and myself?"

"I am," said Ruperta, firmly; "I always was,—especially after that beautiful sermon, you know, mamma."

Says the proud mother, "You might tell Lady Bassett you think it is your mission to reunite your father and Sir Charles."

"Mamma!" said Ruperta, reproachfully. That was to stop her mouth. "If you tell all the wild things I say to you, her ladyship will think me very presumptuous."

"No, no," said Lady Bassett, "enthusiasm is not presumption. Enthusiasm is beautiful, and the brightest flower of youth."

"I am glad you think so, Lady Bassett; for people who have no enthusiasm seem very hard and mean to me."

"And so they are," said Lady Bassett, warmly.

But I have no time to record the full details of the conversation. I can only present the general result. Lady Bassett thought Ruperta a beautiful and noble girl, that any house might be proud to adopt; and Ruperta was charmed by Lady Bassett's exquisite manners, and touched and interested by her pale yet still beautiful face and eyes. They made friends: but it was not till the third visit, when many kind things had passed between them, that Lady Bassett ventured on the subject she had at heart. "My dear," said she, to Ruperta, "when I first saw you, I wondered at my son Compton's audacity in loving a young lady so much more advanced than himself; but now I must be frank with you; I think the poor boy's audacity was only a proper courage. He has all my sympathy, and, if he is not quite indifferent to you, let me just put in my word, and say there is not a young lady in the world I could bear for my daughter-in-law, now I have seen and talked with you, my dear."

"Thank you, Lady Bassett," said Mrs. Bassett; "and, since you have said so much, let me speak my mind. So long as your son is attached to my daughter, I could never

welcome any other son-in-law. I HAVE GOT THE TIPPET."

Lady Bassett looked at Ruperta for an explanation. Ruperta only blushed, and looked uncomfortable. She hated all allusion to the feats of her childhood.

Mrs. Bassett saw Lady Bassett's look of perplexity, and said, eagerly, "You never missed it? All the better. I thought I would keep it, for a peacemaker partly."

"My dear friend," said Lady Bassett, "you are speaking riddles to me; what tippet?"

"The tippet your son took off his own shoulders and put it round my girl that terrible night they were lost in the wood. Forgive me keeping it, Lady Bassett,—I know I was little better than a thief,—but it was only a tippet to you, and to me it was much more. Ah! Lady Bassett, I have loved your darling boy ever since; you can't wonder, you are a mother; and," turning suddenly on Ruperta, "why do you keep saying he is only a boy? If he was man enough to do that at seven years of age, he must have a manly heart. No; I could n't bear the sight of any other son-in-law; and, when you are a mother, you'll understand many things; and, for one, you'll—under—stand—why I'm so—fool—ish: seeing the sweet boy's mother ready—to cry—too—oh! oh! oh!"

Lady Bassett held out her arms to her, and the mothers had a sweet cry together in each other's arms.

Ruperta's eyes were wet at this; but she told her mother she ought not to agitate Lady Bassett, and her so ill.

"And that is true, my good, sensible girl," said Mrs. Bassett; "but it has lain in my heart this nine years, and I could not keep it to myself any longer. But you are a beauty and a spoiled child, and so I suppose you think nothing of his giving you his tippet to keep you warm."

"Don't say that, mamma," said Ruperta, reproachfully. "I spoke to dear Compton about it not long ago. He had forgotten all about it even."

"All the more to his credit; but don't you ever forget it, my own girl."

"I never will, mamma."

By degrees the three became so unserved that Ruperta was gently urged to declare her real sentiments.

By this time the young beauty was quite cured of her fear, lest she should be an unwelcome daughter-in-law: but there was an obstacle in her own mind. She was a frank, courageous girl; but this appeal tried her hard.

She blushed, fixed her eyes steadily on the ground, and said, pretty firmly and very slowly, "I had always a great affection for my cousin Compton; and so I have now.

But I am not in love with him. He is but a boy: now I—"

A glance at the large mirror, and a superb smile of beauty and conscious womanhood, completed the sentence.

"He will get older every day," said Mrs. Bassett.

"And so shall I."

"But you will not look older, and he will. You have come to your full growth. He has n't."

"I agree with the dear girl," said Lady Bassett, adroitly. "Compton, with his fair hair, looks so young, it would be ridiculous at present. But it is possible to be engaged, and wait a proper time for marriage; what I fear is, lest you should be tempted by some other offer. To speak plainly, I hear that Mr. Rutland pays his addresses to you, and visits at Highmore."

"Yes, he has been there twice."

"He is welcome to your father; and his prospects are dazzling; and he is not a boy for he has long mustaches."

"I am not dazzled by his mustaches, and still less by his prospects," said the fair young beauty.

"You are an extraordinary girl."

"That she is," said Mrs. Bassett. "Her father has no more power over her than I have."

"O mamma! am I a disobedient girl, then?"

"No, no. Only, in this one thing, I see you will go your own way."

Lady Bassett put in her word. "Well, but this one thing is the happiness or misery of her whole life. I cannot blame her for looking well before she leaps."

A grateful look from Ruperta's glorious eyes repaid the speaker.

"But," said Lady Bassett, tenderly, "it is something to have two mothers when you marry, instead of one; and you would have two, my love: I would try and live for you."

This touched Ruperta to the heart. She curled round Lady Bassett's neck, and they kissed each other like mother and daughter.

"This is too great a temptation," said Ruperta. "Yes: I will engage myself to Cousin Compton, if papa's consent can be obtained. Without his consent I could not marry any one."

"Nobody can obtain it, if you cannot," said Mrs. Bassett.

Ruperta shook her head. "Mark my words, mamma, it will take me years to gain it. Papa is as obstinate as a mule. To be sure, I am as obstinate as fifty."

"It shall not take years, nor yet months," said Lady Bassett. "I know Mr. Bassett's objection, and I will remove it, cost me what it may."

This speech surprised the other two ladies so, they made no reply.

Said Lady Bassett firmly, "Do you pledge yourself to me, if I can obtain Mr. Bassett's consent?"

"I do," said Ruperta. "But —"

"You think my power with your father must be smaller than yours. I hope to show you you are mistaken."

The ladies rose to go: Lady Bassett took leave of them thus: "Good by, my most valued friend, and sister in sorrow; good by, my dear daughter."

At the gate of Huntercombe, who should they meet but Compton Bassett, looking very pale and unhappy.

He was upon honor not to speak to Ruperta; but he gazed on her with a wistful and terrified look, that was very touching. She gave him a soft pitying smile in return, that drove him almost wild with hope.

That night Richard Bassett sat in his chair, gloomy.

When his wife and daughter spoke to him in their soft accents, he returned short, surly answers. Evidently a storm was brewing.

At last it burst: he had heard of Ruperta's repeated visits to Huntercombe Hall. "You are not dealing fairly with me, you two," said he. "I allowed you to go once to see a woman that says she is very ill but I warned you she was the cunningest woman in creation, and would make a fool of you both; and now I find you are always going. This will not do. She is netting two simple birds, that I have the care of. Now, listen to me: I forbid you two ever to set foot in that house again. Do you hear me?"

"We hear you, papa," said Mrs. Bassett, quietly, "we must be deaf, if we did not."

Ruperta kept her countenance with difficulty.

"It is not a request, it is a command."

Mrs. Bassett for once in her life fired up. "And a most tyrannical one," said she.

Ruperta put her hand before her mother's mouth, then turned to her father.

"There was no need to express your wish so harshly, papa. We shall obey."

Then she whispered her mother, "And Mr. Rutland shall pay for it."

Mrs. Bassett communicated this behest to Lady Bassett in a letter.

Then Lady Bassett summoned all her courage, and sent for her son Compton. "Compton," said she, "I must speak to Reginald. Can you find him?"

"O yes, I can find him. I am sorry to say anybody can find him at this time of day."

"Why, where is he?"

"I hardly like to tell you."

"Do you think his peculiarities have escaped me?"

"At the public-house."

"Ask him to come to me."

Compton went to the public-house, and there, to his no small disgust, found Mr. Reginald Bassett playing the fiddle, and four people, men and women, dancing to the sound, whilst one or two more smoked and looked on.

Compton restrained himself till the end of that dance, and then stepped up to Reginald, and whispered him, "Mamma wants to see you directly."

"Tell her I'm busy."

"I shall tell her nothing of the kind. You know she is very ill, and has not seen you yet: and now she wants to. So come along at once, like a good fellow."

"Youngster," said Reginald, "it is a rule with me never to leave a young woman for an old one."

"Not for your mother?"

"No, nor my grandmother either."

"Then you were born without a heart. But you shall come, whether you like it or not, — though I have to drag you there by the throat."

"Learn to spell 'able' first."

"I'll spell it on your head, if you don't come."

"O, that is the game, young un, is it?"

"Yes."

"Well, don't let us have a shindy on the bricks; there is a nice little paddock outside. Come out there, and I'll give you a lesson."

"Thank you; I don't feel inclined to assist you in degrading our family."

"Chaps that are afraid to fight should n't threaten. Come now, the first knock-down blow shall settle it. If I win, you stay here and dance with us. If you win, I go to the old woman."

Compton consented, somewhat reluctantly; but, to do him justice, his reluctance arose entirely from his sense of relationship, and not from any fear of his senior.

The young gentlemen took off their coats, and proceeded to spar without any further ceremony.

Reginald, whose agility was greater than his courage, danced about on the tips of his toes, and succeeded in planting a tap or two on Compton's cheek.

Compton smarted under these, and presently, in following his antagonist, who fought like a shadow, he saw Ruperta and her mother looking horror-stricken over the palings.

Infuriated with Reginald for this exposure, he rushed in at him, received a severe cut over the eye, but dealt him with his mighty Anglo-Saxon arm a full straightforward smasher on the forehead, which knocked him head over heels like a nine-pin.

That active young man picked himself up wondrous slowly: rheumatism seemed to

have suddenly seized his well-oiled joints: he then addressed his antagonist, in his most ingratiating tones, — "All right, sir," said he. "You are the best man. I'll go to the old lady this minute."

"I'll see you go," said Compton, sternly: "and mind I can run, as well as hit: so none of your gypsy tricks with me."

Then he came sheepishly to the palings, and said, "It is not my fault, Miss Bassett; he would not come to mamma without, and she wants to speak to him."

"O! he is hurt! he is wounded!" cried Ruperta. "Come here to me."

He came to her, and she pressed her white handkerchief tenderly on his eyebrow, it was bleeding a little.

"Well, are you coming?" said Reginald ironically: "or do you like young women better than old ones?"

Compton instantly drew back a little, made two steps, laid his hand on the palings, vaulted over, and followed Reginald.

"That's your boy," said Mrs. Bassett.

Ruperta made no reply, but begun to gulp.

"What is the matter, darling?"

"The fighting — the blood" — said Ruperta, sobbing.

Mrs. Bassett drew her on one side, and soon soothed her.

When their gentle bosoms got over their agitation, they rather enjoyed the thing, especially Ruperta: she detested Reginald for his character, and for having insulted her father.

All of a sudden, she cried out "He has taken my handkerchief. How dare he?" And she affected anger.

"Never mind, dear," said Mrs. Bassett, coolly, "we have got his tippet."

CHAPTER THE THIRTY-SIXTH.

COULD any one have looked through the keyhole at Lady Bassett waiting for Reginald, he would have seen, by the very movements of her body, the terrible agitation of the mind. She rose, — she sat down, — she walked about with wild energy, — she dropped on the sofa, and appeared to give it up as impossible, — but, ere long, that deadly languor gave way to impatient restlessness again.

At last her quick ear heard a footstep in the corridor, accompanied by no rustle of petticoats; and yet the footstep was not Compton's.

Instantly she glanced with momentary terror towards the door.

There was a tap.

She sat down, and said, with a tone from

which all agitation was instantly banished, "Come in."

The door opened, and the swarthy Reginald, diabolically handsome, with his black snaky curls, entered the room.

She rose from her chair, and fixed her great eyes on him, as if she would read him soul and body before she ventured to speak.

"Here I am, mamma: sorry to see you look so ill."

"Thank you, my dear," said Lady Bassett, without relaxing for a moment that searching gaze.

She said, still covering him with her eye, "Would you cure me if you could?"

To appreciate this opening, and Lady Bassett's sweet engaging manner, you must understand that this young man was, in her eyes, a sort of black snake. Her flesh crept, with fear and repugnance, at the sight of him. Yet that is how she received him, being a mother defending her favorite son.

"Of course I would," said Reginald. "Just you tell me how."

Excellent words. But the lady's calm infallible eye saw a cunning twinkle in those black twinkling orbs. Young as he was, he was on his guard, and waiting for her. Nor was this surprising: Reginald, naturally intelligent, had accumulated a large stock of low cunning in his travels and adventures with the gypsies, a smooth and cunning people. Lady Bassett's fainting upon his return, his exclusion from her room, and one or two minor circumstances, had set him thinking.

The moment she saw that look, Lady Bassett, with swift tact, glided away from the line she had intended to open, and, after merely thanking him, and saying, "I believe you, dear," though she did not believe him, she resumed, in a very impressive tone, "You see me worse than ever to-day, because my mind is in great trouble. The time is come when I must tell you a secret, which will cause you a bitter disappointment. Why I send for you is, to see whether I cannot do something for you to make you happy, in spite of that cruel disappointment."

Not a word from Reginald.

"Mr. Bassett — forgive me, if you can — for I am the most miserable woman in England — you are not the heir to this place: you are not Sir Charles Bassett's son."

"What!?" shouted the young man.

Her fortitude gave way for a moment. She shook her head, in confirmation of what she had said, and hid her burning face and scalding tears in her white and wasted hands.

There was a long silence.

Reginald was asking himself if this could

be true; or was it a manœuvre to put her favorite Compton over his head.

Lady Bassett looked up, and saw this paltry suspicion in his face. She dried her tears directly, and went to a bureau, unlocked it, and produced the manuscript confession she had prepared for her husband.

She bade Reginald observe the superscription, and the date.

When he had done so, she took her scissors, and opened it for him.

"Read what I wrote to my beloved husband at a time when I expected soon to appear before my Judge."

She then sank upon the sofa, and lay there like a log; only, from time to time, during the long reading, tears trickled from her eyes.

Reginald read the whole story, and saw the facts must be true: more than that, being young, and a man, he could not entirely resist the charm of a narrative, in which a lady told at full, the love, the grief, the terror, the sufferings, of her heart, and the terrible temptation, under which she had gone astray.

He laid it down at last, and drew a long breath.

"It's a devil of a job for *me*," said he; "but I can't blame you. You did that Dick Bassett, and I hate him. But what is to become of *me*?"

"What offer you, is a life, in which you will be happier than you ever could be at Huntercombe. I mean to buy you vast pasture-fields in Australia, and cattle to feed. Those noble pastures will be bounded only by wild forests and hills. You will have swift horses to ride over your own domain, or to gallop hundreds of miles at a stretch, if you like. No confinement there; no fences and boundaries; all as free as air. No monotony:—one week you can dig for gold, another you can ride amongst your flocks, another you can hunt. All this in a climate so delightful that you can lie all night in the open air, without a blanket, under a new firmament of stars, not one of which illumines the dull nights of Europe."

The bait was too tempting. "Well, you are the right sort," cried Reginald.

But presently he began to doubt. "But all that will cost a lot of money."

"It will; but I have a great deal of money."

Reginald thought; and said, suspiciously, "I don't know why you should do all this for me."

"Do you not? What, when I have brought you into this family, and encouraged you in such vast expectations, could I, in honor and common humanity, let you fall into poverty and neglect? No. I have many thousand pounds, all my own, and

you will have them all, and perhaps waste them all; but it will take you some time, because, whilst you are wasting, I shall be saving more for you."

Then there was a pause, each waiting for the other.

Then Lady Bassett said, quietly, and with great apparent composure, "Of course there is a condition attached to all this."

"What is that?"

"I must receive from you a written paper, signed by yourself and by Mrs. Meyrick, acknowledging that you are not Sir Charles's son, but distinctly pledging yourself to keep the secret so long as I continue to furnish you with the means of living. You hesitate. Is it not fair?"

"Well, it looks fair; but it is an awkward thing, signing a paper of that sort."

"You doubt me, sir: you think that, because I have told one great falsehood, from good but erring motives, I may break faith with you. Do not insult me with these doubts, sir. Try and understand that there are ladies and gentlemen in the world, though you prefer gypsies. Have you forgotten that night when you laid me under so deep a debt, and I told you I never would forget it? From that day was I not always your friend? Was I not always the one to make excuses for you?"

Reginald assented to that.

"Then trust me. I pledge you my honor that I am this day the best friend you ever had, or ever can have. Refuse to sign that paper,—and I shall soon be in my grave, leaving behind me my confession, and other evidence, on which you will be dismissed from this house with ignominy, and without a farthing, for your best friend will be dead, and you will have killed her."

He looked at her full: he said, with a shade of compunction, "I am not a gentleman; but you are a lady. I'll trust you. I'll sign anything you like."

"That confidence becomes you," said Lady Bassett; "and now I have no objection to show you I deserve it. Here is a letter to Mr. Rolfe, by which you may learn I have already placed three thousand pounds to his account, to be laid out by him for your benefit in Australia, where he has many confidential friends; and this is a check for £500 I drew in your favor yesterday. Do me the favor to take it."

He did her that favor with sparkling eyes.

"Now here is the paper I wish you to sign; but your signature will be of little value to me without Mary Meyrick's."

"O, she will sign it directly: I have only to tell her."

"Are you sure? Men can be brought to take a dispassionate view of their own interest: but women are not so wise. Take it, and try her. If she refuses, bring her to

me *directly*. Do you understand? Otherwise, in one fatal hour, her tongue will ruin you, and destroy me."

Impressed with these words, Reginald hurried to Mrs. Meyrick, and told her, in an off-hand way, she must sign that paper *directly*.

She looked at it and turned very white; but went on her guard *directly*.

"Sign such a wicked lie as that?" said she. "That I never will. You *are* his son, and Huntercombe shall be yours. She is an unnatural mother."

"Gammon!" said Reginald. "You might as well say a fox is the son of a gander. Come now; I am not going to let you cut my throat with your tongue. Sign at once, or else come to her this moment, and tell her so."

"That I will," said Mary Meyrick, "and give her my mind."

This doughty resolution was a little shaken when she cast eyes upon Lady Bassett, and saw how wan and worn she looked.

She moderated her violence, and said, sullenly, "Sorry to gainsay *you*, my lady, and you so ill; but this is a paper I never *can* sign. It would rob him of Huntercombe. I'd sooner cut my hand off at the wrist."

"Nonsense, Mary," said Lady Bassett, contemptuously.

She then proceeded to reason with her; but it was nouse. Mary would not listen to reason, and defied her at last in a loud voice.

"Very well," said Lady Bassett. "Then, since you will not do it my way, it shall be done another way. I shall put my confession in Sir Charles's hands, and insist on his dismissing him from the house, and you from your farm. It will kill me, and the money I intended for Reginald I shall leave to Compton."

"These are idle words, my lady. You dare n't."

"I dare anything when once I make up my mind to die."

She rang the bell.

Mary Meyrick affected contempt.

A servant came to the door.

"Request Sir Charles to come to me immediately."

CHAPTER THE THIRTY-SEVENTH.

"Don't you be a fool," said Reginald to his nurse.

"Sir Charles will send you to prison for it," said Lady Bassett.

"For what I done along with you?"

"O, he will not punish his wife; he will look out for some other victim."

"Sign, you d—d old fool," cried Reginald, seizing Mary Meyrick roughly by the arm.

Strange to say, Lady Bassett interfered, with a sort of majestic horror. She held up her hand, and said, "Do not dare to lay a finger on her!"

Then Mary burst into tears, and said she would sign the paper.

Whilst she was signing it, Sir Charles's step was heard in the corridor.

He knocked at the door just as she signed. Reginald had signed already.

Lady Bassett put the paper into the manuscript book, and the book into the bureau, and said, "Come in," with an appearance of composure belied by her beating heart.

"Here is Mrs. Meyrick, my dear."

In those few seconds so perfect a liar as Mary Meyrick had quite recovered herself.

"If you please, sir," said she, "I be come to ast if you will give us a new lease, for ourn it is run out."

"You had better talk to the steward about that."

"Very well, sir," and she made her courtesy.

Reginald remained, not knowing exactly what to do.

"My dear," said Lady Bassett, "Reginald has come to bid me good by. He is going to visit Mr. Rolfe, and take his advice, if you have no objection."

"None whatever; and I hope he will treat it with more respect than he does mine."

Reginald shrugged his shoulders, and was going out, when Lady Bassett said, "Won't you kiss me, Reginald, as you are going away?"

He came to her: she kissed him, and whispered in his ear, "Be true to me, as I will be to you."

Then he left her, and she felt like a dead thing, with exhaustion. She lay on the sofa, and Sir Charles sat beside her, and made her drink a glass of wine.

She lay very still that afternoon; but at night she slept: a load was off her mind for the present.

Next day she was so much better she came down to dinner.

What she now hoped was, that entire separation, coupled with the memory of the boy's misdeeds, would cure Sir Charles entirely of his affection for Reginald; and so that, after about twenty years more of conjugal fidelity, she might find courage to reveal to her husband the fault of her youth, at a time when all its good results remained to help excuse it, and all its bad results had vanished.

Such was the plan this extraordinary wo-

man conceived, and its success so far had a wonderful effect on her health.

But a couple of days passed, and she did not hear either from Reginald or Mr. Rolfe. That made her a little anxious.

On the third day Compton asked her, with an angry flush on his brow, whether she had not sent Reginald up to London.

"Yes, dear," said Lady Bassett.

"Well, he is not gone, then."

"Oh!"

"He is living at his nurse's. I saw him talking to an old gypsy that lives on the farm."

Lady Bassett groaned, but said nothing.

"Never mind, mamma," said Compton.

"Your other children must love you all the more."

This news caused Lady Bassett both anxiety and terror. She divined bad faith, and all manner of treachery, none the less terrible for being vague.

Down went her health again, and her short-lived repose.

Meantime, Reginald, in reality, was staying at the farm on a little business of his own.

He had concerted an expedition with the foreign Gent, and was waiting for a dark and gusty night.

He had undertaken this expedition with mixed motives, spite, and greed, especially the latter. He would never have undertaken it with a £500 check in his pocket; but some minds are so constituted they cannot forego a bad design once formed: so Mr. Reginald persisted, though one great motive existed no longer.

On this expedition it is now our lot to accompany him.

The night was favorable, and at about two o'clock Reginald and the foreign Gent stood under Richard Bassett's dining-room window, with crape over their eyes, noses, and mouths, and all manner of unlawful implements in their pockets.

The foreign Gent prized the shutters open with a little crowbar; he then, with a glazier's diamond, soon cut out a small pane, inserted a cunning hand, and opened the window.

Then Reginald gave him a leg, and he got into the room.

The agile youth followed him, without assistance.

They lighted a sort of bull's-eye, and poured the concentrated light on the cupboard door, behind which lay the treasure of glorious old plate.

Then the foreign Gent produced his skeleton keys, and, after several ineffective trials, opened the door softly, and revealed the glittering booty.

At sight of it the foreign Gent could not suppress an ejaculation; but the younger

one clapped his hand before his mouth hurriedly.

The foreign Gent unrolled a sort of green baize apron he had round him; it was, in reality, a bag.

Into this receptacle the pair conveyed one piece of plate after another, with surprising dexterity, rapidity, and noiselessness. When it was full, they began to fill the deep pockets of their shooting-jackets.

While thus employed, they heard a rapid footstep, and Richard Bassett opened the door. He was in his trousers and shirt, and had a pistol in his hand.

At sight of him Reginald uttered a cry of dismay; the foreign Gent blew out the light.

Richard Bassett, among whose faults want of personal courage was not one, rushed forward, and collared Reginald.

But the foreign Gent had raised the crowbar, to defend himself, and struck him a blow on the head that made him stagger back.

The foreign Gent seized this opportunity, and ran at once at the window, and jumped at it.

If Reginald had been first, he would have gone through like a cat, but the foreign Gent, older, and obstructed by the contents of his pockets, higgled, and stuck a few seconds in the window.

That brief delay was fatal; Richard Bassett levelled his pistol deliberately at him, fired, and sent a ball through his shoulder, he fell, like a log, upon the ground outside.

Richard then levelled another barrel at Reginald, but he howled out for quarter, and was immediately captured, and, with the assistance of the brave Jessie, who now came boldly to her master's aid, his hands were tied behind him, and he was made prisoner, with the stolen articles in his pocket.

When they were tying him, he whimpered, and said it was only a lark; he never meant to keep anything. He offered a hundred pounds down, if they would let him off.

But there was no mercy for him.

Richard Bassett had a candle lighted, and inspected the prisoner. He lifted his crape veil, and said "Oho!"

"You see it was only a lark," said Reginald, and shook in every limb.

Richard Bassett smiled grimly, and said nothing. He gave Jessie strict orders to hold her tongue, and she and he between them took Reginald, and locked him up in a small room adjoining the kitchen.

Then they went to look for the other burglar.

He had emptied his pockets of all the plate, and crawled away. It is supposed he threw away the plate, either to soften Regi-

nald's offence, or in the belief that he had received his death wound, and should not require silver vessels where he was going.

Bassett picked up the articles, and brought them in, and told Jessie to light the fire, and make him a cup of coffee.

He replaced all the plate, except the articles left in Reginald's pocket.

Then he went up stairs, and told his wife that burglars had broken into the house, but had taken nothing; she was to give herself no anxiety. He told her no more than this, for his dark and cruel nature had already conceived an idea he did not care to communicate to her, on account of the strong opposition he foresaw from so good a Christian: besides, of late, since her daughter came home to back her, she had spoken her mind more than once.

He kept her then in the dark, and went down stairs again to his coffee.

He sat and sipped it, and, with it, his coming vengeance.

All the defeats and mortifications he had endured from Huntercombe returned to his mind; and now, with one master-stroke, he would balance them all.

Yet he felt a little compunction.

Active hostilities had ceased for many years.

Lady Bassett, at all events, had held out the hand to his wife. The blow he meditated was very cruel: would not his wife and daughter say it was barbarous? Would not his own heart, the heart of a father, reproach him afterwards?

These misgivings, that would have restrained a less obstinate man, irritated Richard Bassett: he went in a rage, and said aloud, "I must do it: I will do it, come what may."

He told Jessie he valued her much: she should have a black silk gown, for her courage and fidelity; but she must not be faithful by halves. She must not breath one word to any soul in the house that the burglar was there under lock and key; if she did he should turn her out of the house that moment.

"Hets!" said the woman, "der ye think I canna haud my whisht, when the maister bids me? I'm nae great clasher at ony time for my pairt."

At seven o'clock in the morning he sent a line to Sir Charles Bassett, to say that his house had been attacked last night, by two armed burglars; he and his people had captured one, and wished to take him before a magistrate at once, since his house was not a fit place to hold him secure. He concluded Sir Charles would not refuse him the benefit of the law, however obnoxious he might be.

Sir Charles's lip curled with contempt at the man who was not ashamed to put such a doubt on paper.

However, he wrote back a civil line, to say that of course he was at Mr. Bassett's service, and would be in his justice-room at nine o'clock.

Meantime, Mr. Richard Bassett went for the constable and an assistant; but, even to them, he would not say precisely what he wanted them for.

His plan was to march an unknown burglar, with his crape on his face, into Sir Charles's study, give his evidence, and then reveal the son to the father.

Jessie managed to hold her tongue for an hour or two, and nothing occurred at Highmore, or in Huntercombe, to interfere with Richard Bassett's barbarous revenge.

Meantime, however, something remarkable had occurred at the distance of a mile and a quarter.

Mrs. Meyrick breakfasted habitually at eight o'clock.

Reginald did not appear.

Mrs. Meyrick went to his room, and satisfied herself he had not passed the night there.

Then she went to the foreign Gent's shed.

He was not there.

Then she went out, and called loudly to them both.

No answer.

Then she went into the nearest meadow, to see if they were in sight.

The first thing she saw was the foreign Gent staggering towards her.

"Drunk!" said she, and went to scold him: but, when she got nearer, she saw at once that something very serious had happened. His dark face was bloodless and awful, and he could hardly drag his limbs along; indeed they had failed him a score of times between Highmore and that place.

Just as she came up with him, he sank once more to the ground, and turned up two despairing eyes towards her.

"O Daddy! what is it? Where's Reginald? Whatever have they done to you?"

"Brandy!" groaned the wounded man.

She flew into the house, and returned in a moment with a bottle. She put it to his lips.

He revived, and told her all, in a few words.

"The young bloke and I went to crack a crib. I'm shot with a bullet. Hide me in that loose hay there; leave me the bottle, and let nobody come nigh me. The beak will be after me very soon."

Then Mrs. Meyrick, being a very strong woman, dragged him to the haystack, and covered him with loose hay.

"Now," said she, trembling, "where's my boy?"

"He's nabbed."

"Oh!"

"And he'll be lagged, unless you can beg him off."

Mary Meyrick uttered a piercing scream. "You wretch! to tempt my boy to this. And him with five hundred pounds in his pocket, and my lady's favor. O, why did we not keep our word with her? She was the wisest, and our best friend. But it is all your doing, you are the devil that tempted him, you old villain!"

"Don't miscall me," said the gypsy.

"Not miscall you, when you have run away, and left them to take my boy to jail. No word is bad enough for you, you villain."

"I'm your father—and a dying man," said the old gypsy calmly, and folded his hands upon his breast with Oriental composure and decency.

The woman threw herself on her knees. "Forgive me, father,—tell me, where is he?"

"Highmore House."

At that simple word her eyes dilated with wild horror, she uttered a loud scream, and flew into the house.

In five minutes she was on her way to Highmore.

She reached that house, knocked hastily at the door, and said she must see Mr. Richard Bassett that moment.

"He is just gone out," said the maid.

"Where to?"

The girl knew her, and began to gossip. "Why, to Huntercombe Hall. What, have n't you heard, Mrs. Meyrick? Master caught a robber last night. Laws, you should have seen him: he have got crape all over his face; and master, and the constable, and Mr. Musters, they be all gone with him to Sir Charles, for to have him committed—the villain.—Why, what ails the woman?"

For Mary Meyrick turned her back on the speaker, and rushed away in a moment.

She went through the kitchen at Huntercombe: she was so well known there, nobody objected: she flew up the stairs, and into Lady Bassett's bedroom. "O my lady! my lady!"

Lady Bassett screamed, at her sudden entrance, and wild appearance.

Mary Meyrick told her all, in a few wild words. She wrung her hands with a great fear.

"It's no time for that," cried Mary, fiercely. "Come down this moment, and save him."

"How can I?"

"You must. You shall!" cried the other. "Don't ask me how. Don't sit wringing your hands, woman. If you are not there in five minutes, to save him, I'll tell all."

"Have mercy on me," cried Lady Bassett.

"I gave him money, I sent him away. It's not my fault."

"No matter; he must be saved, or I'll ruin you. I can't stay here: I must be there, and so must you."

She rushed down the stairs, and tried to get into the justice-room; but admission was refused her.

Then she gave a sort of wild snarl, and ran round to the small room adjoining the justice-room. Through this she penetrated, and entered the justice-room, but not in time to prevent the evidence from being laid before Sir Charles.

What took place in the mean time was briefly this. The prisoner, handcuffed now instead of tied, was introduced between the constable and his assistant; the door was locked, and Sir Charles received Mr. Bassett with a ceremonious bow, seated himself, and begged Mr. Bassett to be seated.

"Thank you," said Mr. Bassett, but did not seat himself. He stood before the prisoner, and gave his evidence; during which, the prisoner's knees were seen to knock together with terror: he was a young man fit for folly, but not for felony.

Said Richard Bassett, "I have a cupboard containing family plate. It is valuable, and, some years ago, I passed a piece of catgut from the door, through the ceiling, to a bell at my bedside."

"Very late last night the bell sounded. I flung on my trousers, and went down with a pistol. I caught two burglars in the act of rifling the cupboard. I went to collar one: he struck me on the head with a crowbar,—Constable, show the crowbar,—I staggered, but recovered myself, and fired at one of the burglars: he was just struggling through the window. He fell, and I thought he was dead; but he got away. I secured the other, and here he is—just as he was when I took him. Constable, search his pockets."

The constable did so, and produced therefrom several pieces of silver plate stamped with the Bassett arms.

"My servant here can confirm this," added Mr. Bassett.

"It is not necessary here," said Sir Charles. Then to the criminal, "Have you anything to say?"

"It was only a lark," quavered the poor wretch.

"I would not advise you to say that where you are going."

He then, while writing out the warrant, said, as a matter of course, "Remove his mask."

The constable lifted it, and started back with a shout of dismay and surprise: Jessie screamed.

Sir Charles looked up, and saw in the burglar he was committing for trial his

first-born, the heir to his house and his lands.

The pen fell from Sir Charles's fingers, and he stared at the wan face and wild, imploring eyes that stared at him.

He stared at the lad, and then put his hand to his heart, and that heart seemed to die within him.

There was a silence, and a horror fell on all. Even Richard Bassett quailed at what he had done.

"Ah! cruel man! cruel man!" moaned the broken father. "God judge you for this—as now I must judge my unhappy son. Mr. Bassett, it matters little to you what magistrate commits you, and I must keep my oath. I am—going—to set you an—example, by signing a warrant—"

"No, no, no!" cried a woman's voice, and Mary Meyrick rushed into the room.

Every person there thought he knew Mary Meyrick; yet she was like a stranger to them now. There was that in her heart at that awful moment which transfigured a handsome but vulgar woman into a superior being. Her cheek was pale, her black eyes large, and her mellow voice had a magic power. "You don't know what you are doing!" she cried. "Go no farther, or you will all curse the hand that harmed a hair of his head; you, most of all, Richard Bassett."

Sir Charles, in any other case, would have sent her out of the room; but, in his misery, he caught at the straw.

"Speak out, woman," he said, "and save the wretched boy, if you can. I see no way."

"There are things it is not fit to speak before all the world. Bid those men go, and I'll open your eyes that stay."

Then Richard Bassett foresaw another triumph, so he told the constable and his man they had better retire for a few minutes, "while," said he, with a sneer, "these wonderful revelations are being made."

When they were gone, Mary turned to Richard Bassett, and said, "Why do you want him sent to prison?—to spite Sir Charles here, to stab his heart through his son."

Sir Charles groaned aloud.

The woman heard, and thought of many things. She flung herself on her knees, and seized his hand. "Don't you cry, my dear old maste; mine is the only heart shall bleed. He is not your son."

"What!" cried Sir Charles, in a terrible voice.

"That is no news to me," said Richard. "He is more like the parson than Sir Charles Bassett."

"For shame! for shame!" cried Mary Meyrick. "O, it becomes you to give fathers to children, when you don't know your

own flesh and blood. He is your son, RICHARD BASSETT."

"My son!" roared Bassett in utter amazement.

"Ay. I should know; FOR I AM HIS MOTHER."

This astounding statement was uttered with all the majesty of truth, and, when she said "I am his mother," the voice turned tender all in a moment.

They were all paralyzed; and, absorbed in this strange revelation, did not hear a tottering footstep: a woman, pale as a corpse, and with eyes glaring large, stood amongst them, all in a moment, as if a ghost had risen from the earth.

It was Lady Bassett.

At sight of her, Sir Charles awoke from the confusion and amazement into which Mary had thrown him, and said, "Ah—! Bella, do you hear what she says, that he is not our son? What, then, have you agreed with your servant to deceive your husband?"

Lady Bassett gasped, and tried to speak: but, before the words would come, the sight of her corpse-like face and miserable agony moved Mary Wells, and she snatched the words out of her mouth.

"What is the use questioning her? She knows no more than you do. I done it all: and done it for the best. My lady's child died; I hid that from her; for I knew it would kill her, and keep you in a madhouse. I done for the best: I put my live child by her side, and she knew no better. As time went on, and the boy so dark, she suspected; but know it she could n't till now. My lady, I am his mother, and there stands his cruel father; cruel to me, and cruel to him. But don't you dare to harm him; I've got all your letters, promising me marriage, I'll take them to your wife and daughter, and they shall know it is your own flesh and blood you are sending to prison. O, I am mad to threaten him: my darling, speak him fair; he is your father; he may have a bit of nature in his heart somewhere, though I could never find it."

The young man put his hands together, like an Oriental, and said, "Forgive me," then sank at Richard Bassett's knees.

Then Sir Charles, himself much shaken, took his wife's arm and led her, trembling like an aspen leaf, from the room.

Perhaps the prayers of Reginald and the tears of his mother would alone have sufficed to soften Richard Bassett; but the threat of exposure to his wife and daughter did no harm. The three soon came to terms.

Reginald to be liberated, on condition of going to London by the next train, and never setting his foot in that parish again. His mother to go with him, and see him off

to Australia. She solemnly pledged herself not to reveal the boy's real parentage to any other soul in the world.

This being settled, Richard Bassett called the constable in, and said the young gentleman had satisfied him that it was a practical joke, though a very dangerous one, and he withdrew the charge of felony.

The constable said he must have Sir Charles's authority for that.

A message was sent to Sir Charles. He came. The prisoner was released, and Mary Meyrick took his arm sharply, as much as to say "Out of my hands you go no more."

Before they left the room, Sir Charles, who was now master of himself, said, with deep feeling, "My poor boy, you can never be a stranger to me. The affection of years cannot be untied in a moment. You see now how folly glides into crime, and crime into punishment. Take this to heart, and never again stray from the paths of honor. Lead an honorable life: and, if you do, write to me as if I was still your father."

They retired, but Richard Bassett, lingered, and hung his head.

Sir Charles wondered what this inveterate foe could have to say now.

At last Richard said, half sullenly, yet with a touch of compunction, "Sir Charles, you have been more generous than I was. You have laid me under an obligation."

Sir Charles bowed loftily.

"You would double that obligation, if you would prevail on Lady Bassett to keep that old folly of mine secret from my wife and daughter. I am truly ashamed of it; and, whatever my faults may have been, they love and respect me."

"Mr. Bassett," said Sir Charles, "my son Compton must be told that he is my heir; but no details injurious to you shall transpire: you may count on absolute secrecy from Lady Bassett and myself."

"Sir Charles," said Richard Bassett, faltering for a moment, "I am very much obliged to you, and I begin to be sorry we are enemies. Good morning."

The agitation and terror of this scene nearly killed Lady Bassett on the spot. She lay all that day in a state of utter prostration.

Meantime, Sir Charles put this and that together, but said nothing. He spoke cheerfully and philosophically to his wife, said it had been a fearful blow, terrible wrench: but it was all for the best; such a son as that would have broken his heart before long.

"Ah, but your wasted affections!" groaned Lady Bassett; and her tears streamed at the thought.

Sir Charles sighed: but said after a while, "Is affection ever entirely wasted? My love for that young fool enlarged my heart. There was a time he did me a deal of good."

But next day, having only herself to think of now, Lady Bassett could bear no longer under the load of deceit. She told Sir Charles, Mary Meyrick had deceived him. "Read this," she said, "and see what your miserable wife has done, who loved you to madness and crime."

Sir Charles looked at her, and saw, in her wasted form, and her face, that, if he did read it, he should kill her.

He restrained himself by a mighty effort, and said, "My dear, excuse me; but on this matter I have more faith in Mary Meyrick's exactness than in yours. Besides, I know your heart, and don't care to be told of your errors in judgment, no, not even by yourself. Sorry to offend an authoress; but I decline to read your book, and, more than that, I forbid you the subject entirely for the next thirty years, at least. Let bygones be bygones."

That eventful morning Mr. Rutland called and proposed to Ruperta. She declined politely, but firmly.

She told Mrs. Bassett; and Mrs. Bassett told Richard in a nervous way; but his answer surprised her. He said he was very glad of it; Ruperta could do better.

Mrs. Bassett could not resist the pleasure of telling Lady Bassett. She went over on purpose with her husband's consent.

Lady Bassett asked to see Ruperta.

"By all means," said Richard Bassett, graciously.

On her return to Highmore, Ruperta asked leave to go to the Hall every day, and nurse Lady Bassett. "They will let her die else," said she.

Richard Bassett assented to that too.

Ruperta, for some weeks, almost lived at the Hall; and, in this emergency, revealed great qualities. As the malevolent small-pox, passing through the gentle cow, comes out the sovereign cow-pox, so, in this gracious nature, her father's vices turned to their kindred virtues; his obstinacy of purpose shone here a noble constancy; his audacity became candor, and his cunning wisdom. Her intelligence saw at once that Lady Bassett was pining to death, and a weak-minded nurse would be fatal: she was all smiles and brightness, and neglected no means to encourage the patient.

With this view, she promised to plight her faith to Compton the moment Lady Bassett should be restored to health: and so, with hopes, and smiles, and the novelty of a daughter's love, she fought with death for Lady Bassett, and at last she won the desperate battle.

This did Richard Bassett's daughter for her father's late enemy.

The grateful husband wrote to Bassett, and now acknowledged his obligation.

A civil, mock-modest reply from Richard Bassett.

From this things went on step by step, till, at last, Compton and Ruperta, at eighteen years of age, were formally betrothed.

Thus the children's love wore out the fathers' hate.

That love, so troubled at the outset, left, by degrees, the region of romance, and rippled smoothly through green, flowery meadows.

Ruperta showed her lover one more phase of girlhood; she, who had been a precocious and forward child, and then a shy and silent girl, came out now a bright and witty young woman, full of vivacity, modesty, and sensibility.

Time cured Compton of his one defect. Ruperta stopped growing at fifteen; but Compton went slowly on: caught her at seventeen, and at nineteen had passed her by a head. He won a scholarship at Oxford, he rowed in College races, and at last in the University race on the Thames.

Ruperta stood, in peerless beauty, dark blue from throat to feet, and saw his boat astern of its rival, saw it come up with, and creep ahead, amidst the roars of the multitude. When she saw her lover, with bare corded arms, as brown as a berry, and set teeth, filling his glorious part in that manly struggle within eight yards of her, she confessed he was not a boy now.

But Lady Bassett accepted no such evidence: being pestered to let them marry at twenty years of age, she clogged her consent with one condition. They must live three years at Huntercombe as man and wife.

"No boy of twenty," said she, "can understand a young woman of that age. I must be in the house to prevent a single misunderstanding between my beloved children."

The young people, who both adored her, voted the condition reasonable. They were married, and a wing of the spacious building allotted to them.

For their sakes let us hope that their wedded life, now happily commenced, will furnish me no materials for another tale; the happiest lives are uneventful.

The foreign Gent recovered his wound, but acquired rheumatism and a dislike for midnight expeditions.

Reginald galloped a year or two over seven hundred miles of colony, sowing his wild oats as he flew, but is now a prosperous squatter, very fond of sleeping in the open air. England was not big enough for

the bold Bohemian. He does very well where he is.

Old Meyrick died, and left his wife a little estate in the next county. Drake asked her hand at the funeral. She married him in six months, and migrated to the estate in question; for Sir Charles refused her a lease of his farm, not choosing to have her near him.

Her new abode was in the next pariah to her sister's.

La Marsh set herself to convert Mary, and often exhorted her to penitence: she bore this pretty well, for some time, being overawed by old reminiscences of sisterly superiority: but at last her vanity rebelled. "Repent! and Repent!" cried she. "Why you be like a cuckoo, all in one song. One would think I had been and robbed a church. 'Tis all very well for you to repent, as led a fastish life at starting: but I never done nothing as I'm ashamed on."

Richard Bassett said one day to Wheeler, "Old fellow there is not a worse poison than Hate. It has made me old before my time. And what does it all come to? We might just as well have kept quiet; for my grandson will inherit Huntercombe and Bassett, after all—"

"Thanks to the girl you would not ring the bells for."

Sir Charles and Lady Bassett lead a peaceful life after all their troubles, and renew their youth in their children, of whom Ruperta is one, and as dear as any.

Yet there is a pensive and humble air about Lady Bassett, which shows she still expiates her fault, though she knows it will always be ignored by him for whose sake she sinned.

In summing her up, it may be as well to compare this with the unmixed self-complacency of Mrs. Drake.

You men and women, who judge this Bella Bassett, be firm, — and do not let her amiable qualities or her good intentions blind you in a plain matter of right and wrong: be charitable, — and ask yourselves how often in your lives, you have seen yourselves, or any other human being, resist a terrible temptation.

My experience is that we resist other people's temptations nobly, and succumb to our own.

So let me end with a line of England's gentlest satirist, —

"Heaven be merciful to us all, sinners as we be."

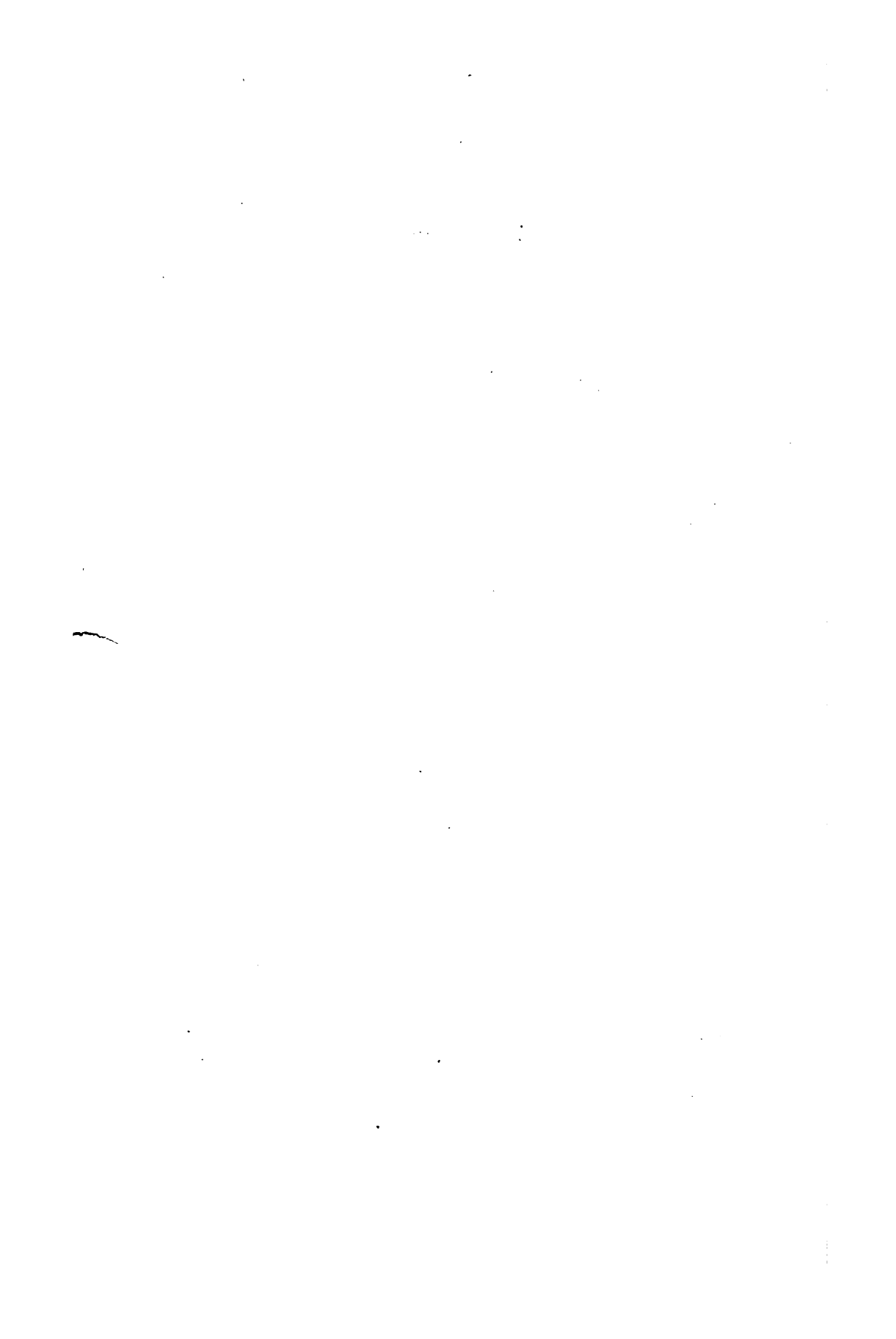
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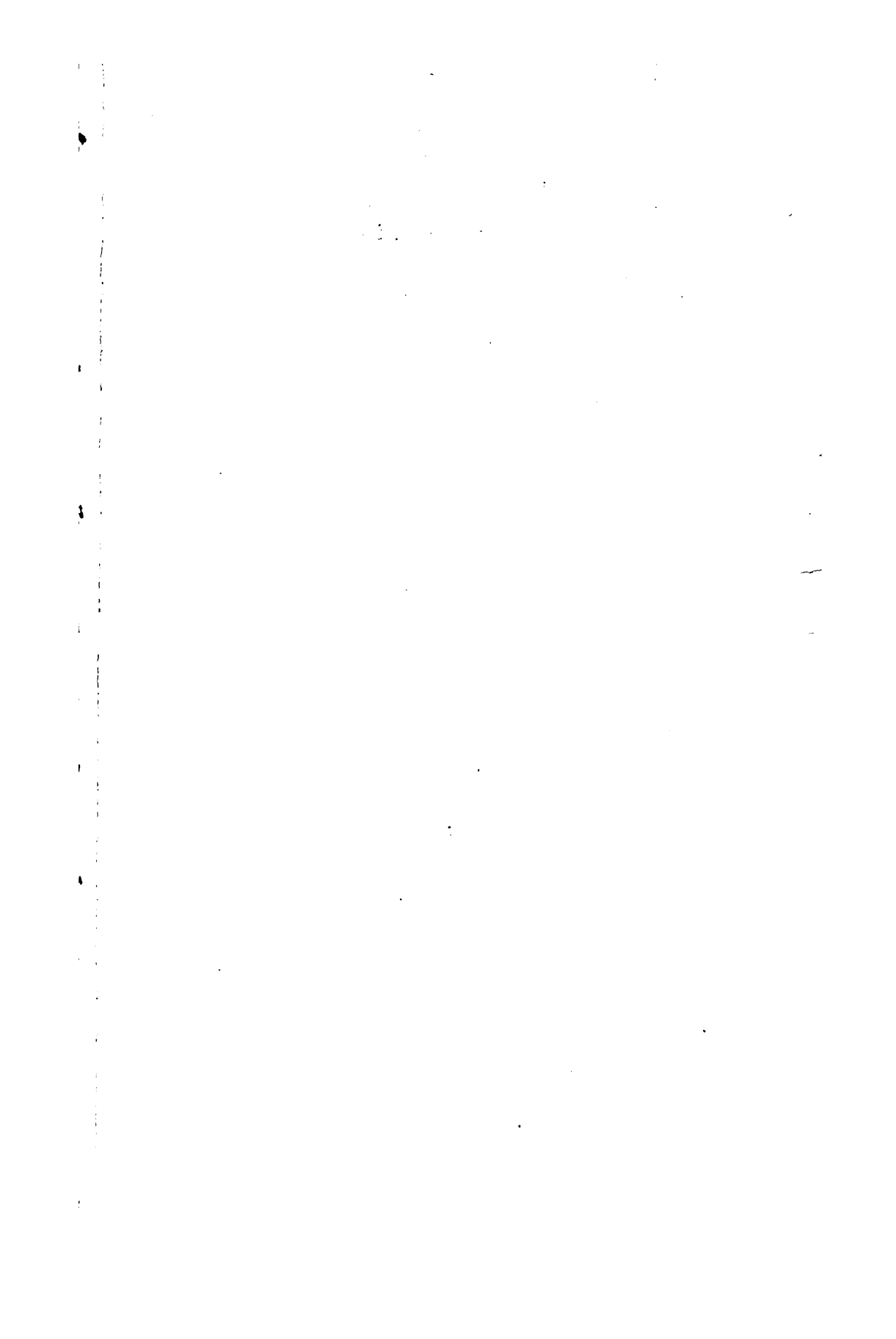
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